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Engage

Final Report



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Executive Summary

The Engage Project has built effective and strong relationships supporting learning disability arts with six venues across the UK, both with Mind the Gap and with each other. It has also enabled a new relationship with York St John University as a research and evaluation partner.

The project allowed venues to share practice with each other, overcoming previous resistance to peer-to-peer learning. Understanding existing practice enabled venues to have a head-start when making changes in their organisation regarding access and inclusion, rather than always starting from the beginning. This included sharing resources, experiences, case studies and templates.

The key findings from Engage are:

1. Embedding Inclusivity

Theatre venues embrace a positive ethos and environment whereby everyone, including those with learning disabilities, feels welcome and experience a sense of community and belonging.

2. Community Engagement

Venues working with communities as both audiences and artists, creating work with and for the people they engage with.

3. Learning Disability Leadership

Training and opportunities for people with learning disabilities to become the new leaders of the arts sector; working with venues collaboratively to create new and engaging inclusive work.

4. Institutional Knowledge

Organisations having a continual and proactive approach to developing institutional knowledge to prevent any loss of information and passion around access and inclusion.

5. Collaborative Practice

Venues and organisations working together to share best practice, creating a safe space for discussion around access and inclusion.

6. University Knowledge Exchange

Working with a university on research and evaluation enabled the development of a multidimensional partnership in which skills and knowledge were exchanged, in both directions, to mutual benefit.

This report shares case studies from all venues involved in the project, all with bespoke areas of improvement regarding access and inclusion. Partner venues focused on community engagement, becoming welcoming/relaxed and on inclusive casting and recruitment to ensure more visibility of artists with learning disabilities on stage.

This project allowed for open and honest discussions around access and inclusion. The project did not propose a single set method of becoming an accessible venue, instead it asserted the value of a network of venues, artists with learning disabilities, organisations and theatre companies to generate flexible and context-responsive best practice. These were integral to developing the willingness of venues to engage and seek change, despite obstacles including staff turnover, capacity, financial limits, and time resources.

Engage also awakened an activism and awareness of the social and political side of learning disability theatre with the artists we were working with, both within Mind the Gap and at other partner companies. Venues welcomed artists with learning disabilities to share their thoughts and opinions on access and inclusion, and their experiences. This had a profound impact on many artists with learning disabilities who now have more understanding of organisational structures and more confidence when addressing access and inclusion issues.

Finally, Engage enabled Mind the Gap to investigate its own practices within their training programmes, employment, and access and leadership within the company. The company used these insights to address procedures and methods to ensure the work they carry out can be as inclusive and accessible as possible.

Context and Overview

Over the last two decades, learning disabled art and artists have progressively gained greater prominence, not least through the work of companies such as Mind the Gap. Within a developing arts culture, artists with a learning disability are seeking to work in mainstream venues to reach broad and general audiences and to develop the skills and opportunities to have leadership roles in arts practice. Yet, while there has been significant movement, barriers and obstacles still exist to these ambitions, some of which have been identified within arts venues and organisations.

Between 2018 and 2021 the Engage project enabled collaboration between Mind the Gap and six venues across the UK, developing bespoke interventions including touring activity and training, designed to increase access and inclusion within each organisation. The aim of the project was to raise aspirations of learning disabled artists, challenge low expectations and leave a legacy of participation, collaboration, advocacy and leadership.

The main objectives of the project were:

- To deliver bespoke programmes in collaboration with venues, communities and artists with learning disabilities with the aim of raising awareness and forming connections.
- To provide ongoing access and participation opportunities that sit alongside Mind the Gap's national touring work.
- To develop Mind the Gap Artists as facilitators and mentors.
- To provide regular opportunities for performances and sharings.

Activities that worked towards these objectives included:

- Training sessions created and hosted by Mind the Gap.
- Access consultations within venues led by individuals with disabilities.
- Strategic touring to venue partners.
- Work experience and volunteering activity.
- Bespoke knowledge and guidance on venue specific aims throughout the project lifetime.

These activities can be seen in Project Timeline.

Who, What & When?

Engage worked with six partner venues, each of which worked with Mind the Gap to create their own objectives for the project. These are listed here:

Gulbenkian Arts Centre, Canterbury

1. Connect with partners and audiences to review their access offer on an ongoing basis.
2. Improve welcome and experience for audiences and participants with learning disabilities.
3. Diversify programme by including at least one learning disabled artist / company a year.

Leeds Playhouse, Leeds

1. Increase artist development programmes for artists with learning disabilities.
2. Increase learning disabled audience development.
3. Create opportunities for traineeships for individuals with learning disabilities.

Northern Stage, Newcastle

1. Increase disability awareness across the organisation.
2. Increase disability awareness across the North East.
3. Develop programming of artists with learning disabilities.

Square Chapel, Halifax

1. Increase the visibility of people with learning disabilities within the venue.
2. Ensure disability awareness training across all staff.
3. Programme and commission artists with learning disabilities.
4. Increase participation of people with learning disabilities through creative engagement.

The Albany, London

1. Include residencies and commissions for artists with learning disabilities in their artistic programming.
2. Become a relaxed venue.
3. Increase disability awareness with in house inductions and training.
4. Learning disability focussed audience development.

Z-Arts, Manchester

1. Improve the quality and increase the offer of their learning disability participation.
2. Expand their networks and grow learning disability audiences and engagements.
3. Develop and implement a programme of activity that results in more artists with disabilities being commissioned to make theatre for young audiences.

Many of the venues originally struggled to work towards objectives and, instead, focused on delivering discrete elements of activity. This focused on achievable actions, rather than long term objectives, which may not be realised within the project lifetime. The reason for Engage focussing on objectives rather than activities was for all venues to work towards big-picture, desired outcomes regarding access and inclusion.

Throughout the project, venues were supported by a member of the Engage team. This person assisted with the organisation of events and programmes of activity, linked venues with local learning disability organisations and communicated with local communities with learning disabilities. They also provided a route for venues to hear from people with lived experience at Mind the Gap, with Artists assisting with access audits and focus groups. All venues also had support from Access Champion, Vicky Ackroyd of Totally Inclusive People, who regularly provided training, guidance, and audits for all venues.

Gulbenkian
Arts Centre



Networking Events

The development of a network across the six venue partners and Mind the Gap was a central objective of Engage. This was, in part, developed through a series of events. The first of these was hosted at Mind the Gap Studios in November 2018 and was the first time all partner venues had been in a physical space together to share thoughts, ideas, barriers and practice. The day was used for venues to have dialogue about the project, their hopes and aims for each venue and to share moments of good practice that Mind the Gap had seen within venues. These included:

- [The Gulbenkian: Welcome & Access Videos](#)
- [Leeds Playhouse: Priority Access Scheme](#)

The workshop included an introduction to the evaluation of the project with benchmarking of venues at the beginning of the project. The inaugural sharing event was one of getting to know each other, sharing in each other's struggles, and building excitement for the journey that was yet to come throughout Engage. Two further networking events were held during the course of Engage.

Let's Get Changed 2019

Let's Get Changed was an Engage event that took place on Wednesday 27 November 2019 at the Albany Theatre, Deptford. The event was instigated, managed, and hosted by Mind the Gap staff and artists, and brought together 117 delegates. Attendees included learning disabled artists, companies and theatre venues, together with international arts sector colleagues, producers, programmers and funders.

Let's Get Changed aimed to provoke thought and inspire action to make radical changes to diversity and inclusion in theatre settings. Action that would bring about significant change in individuals and organisations. Mind the Gap event organisers wanted each delegate to feel that all interactions, from the invitation, to the event, to the post-event evaluation, were positive, clear, accessible and good quality. The event included performances from eight different learning-disability companies / individuals including StopGap & Carousel, BLINK Dance, Cutting Edge Theatre, About Face Theatre, Sardines Dance Collective and Confidance, a film by Hubbub Theatre and Adam Smith on piano.

The central provocation asked 'How can we create more high-quality opportunities for people with learning disabilities as artists, participants and audiences?'. Discussions centred on relaxed performances, support for learning disabled artists / companies and making changes that interrupt the status quo.

The Let's Get Changed: Evaluation Report is in the Appendix.

Changing the Scene 2021

Changing the Scene was the final Engage event held on 29 and 30 September 2021, hosted at Northern Stage, Newcastle. This event was much more intimate and involved different departments from venues that had participated in the Engage project. We came together to celebrate the project's achievements, and share learning and best practice. At this time, theatres were beginning to re-open after Covid-19 so, for many of the venue teams, this was one of the first times they had met up again after months of working from home or being furloughed.

Over the two days, the venue partners delivered presentations about their experiences of the project, sharing learning, challenges, and highlights:

- Northern Stage had created Access Groups so that accessibility became embedded across their organisation.
- Emerging art company Confidance had developed an Artist Rider to improve communications between artists and venues.
- Gulbenkian had made short films to prepare visitors, artists, and audiences for their visit.
- The Albany, in the process of becoming a Relaxed Venue, posed the question: What does relaxed really mean and is that the best word to use?
- Z-arts had explored making recruitment and staff inductions more accessible, making written documents more visual and integrating them with video.
- Leeds Playhouse shared lots of great information, including, implementing more informal workshop-style casting sessions, having Creative Enablers available to support artists and integrated captioning.
- Square Chapel also attended the event after coming out of administration and spoke about their previous success in the project: focusing on developing pathways into the arts for people with learning disabilities and the future of the venue.

Changes: Covid-19

The project was significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020/2021. During this time, theatres across the UK were unable to open their doors to the public, and artists were unable to meet or rehearse face to face. This meant that all live performances and in-person creative engagement stopped. During this time the Engage project went digital, creating online training programmes and networking activity, as well as sending weekly resource packs to all partner venues and community partnerships.

In addition to Covid-19, one of the venues, Square Chapel Arts Centre, went into administration in March 2020, meaning they could no longer engage with the project and work towards their objectives. However, in September 2022 Arts At The Mill CIC became official owners of the

venue and started to re-engage with the project. Although the venue didn't officially re-open until post-Engage-activity, staff members across the organisation attended training and used the project's network to prepare for re-opening as an accessible and inclusive venue.

Finally, turnover of staff both within Mind the Gap and partner venues caused changes within the project. Throughout the project, there were three different Creative Engagement Coordinators, with an additional role being created in 2019 for the south of England. Across the partner venues, only one venue had a consistent member of staff who engaged with the project. All other venues either had staff role changes, or individuals leaving the organisation. This created some inconsistency within the objectives, communications, and evaluations. This experience reflects the widespread high staff turnover rates in the arts, compounded by Covid-19 impacts, and connects directly to our key finding about sustaining and saving institutional knowledge.

Methodology

The research and evaluation for the Engage project was conducted in collaboration with York St John University and through the funding of a PhD studentship. This enabled a researcher, Lauren Hall, to be embedded within Mind the Gap for three years. Being embedded within the company enabled the researcher to witness practice within the field, and build relationships with artists and venue partners.

The methods used within this evaluation are participatory in ethos and aim to truly deliver the voices of learning disabled artists and of the arts organisations. This involved a range of approaches including 'deep hanging out', interviews and photo-elicitation. It also involved the development of peer-research through artists with learning disabilities taking on the role of co-researchers. Each of these is described in further detail below. Participatory methods open new and broader perspectives for the research of everyday practices, especially where the methodology and self-concept of qualitative social research are concerned. They are particularly important in contexts such as this, when researching with communities or individuals who have historically not been given a voice within research or public discourse.

Conducting the evaluation in conjunction with York St John University enabled additional outcomes and legacies beyond the scope of Engage, which developed into a finding in its own right. One of these is a PhD thesis, an in-depth study under the title 'What is a learning disabled artist?', which articulates three key insights relating to identity, interdependence, and leadership.

Deep Hanging Out

Deep Hanging Out is an anthropological research method of immersing oneself in a cultural, group or social experience on an informal level. It is valued for allowing a more natural development of knowledge production within a particular context (Geertz, 1998). Within this research some of the most poignant insights came from this anthropological research, due to its participatory practice of spending extended periods of time within a group. Deep Hanging Out allowed the researcher time to spend in arts organisations with staff, artists and audiences to observe and discuss the venue, what was going on and responses from all individuals.

Interviews

Interviewing is a qualitative research technique, which 'involves conducting intensive individual interviews with a small number of respondents to explore their perspectives on a particular idea, program or situation' (Boyce & Neale, 2006). For this project, interviews were carried out face-to-face, moving to online platforms such as Zoom during the pandemic. The interviews elicited information about the progress towards objectives, any barriers being faced and successes that were celebrated. The interviews were semi-structured, with the same set of questions answered by all interviewees, however additional questions were also asked to clarify or further expand on certain issues. Most interviews lasted 45 minutes to one hour. They were recorded, transcribed and then analysed alongside all other interviews.

Photo Elicitation

Photo-elicitation is based on the principle of using one or more images in an interview and asking the informant to comment on them. Videos, paintings, or any other type of visual representation can also be used with images provided either by the researcher or research participant. A pivotal aspect of this approach is not so much studying the images as it is analysing how informants respond to them, attributing social and personal meaning and values. Its value is on providing a stimulus that can prompt greater reflection, refresh memory and push beyond immediate responses. Photo elicitation was used with arts organisations to reflect on moments within the venue, or certain physical areas of the venue. This was also used with focus groups of learning disabled audiences at Mind the Gap.

Peer-Research

In 2021 Daniel Foulds, a learning disabled writer and researcher, was hired as the Assistant Evaluator for the Engage project. The role was created to ensure employment and training opportunities for learning disabled researchers were available. Foulds also brought lived experience to the role, which gave a new perspective to the evaluation process and helped develop open and honest conversations with venues during interviews and networking events.

This process of inclusive research helped to ensure that any of the findings below have been produced in a collaborative way, enabling an individual with a learning disability to exercise control over processes and outcomes, and ensuring rights. Inclusive research is part of a wider rights movement, which has been developed alongside the closure of large institutions for people with learning disabilities, and ‘the associated arguments for promoting access to normal patterns of life known as normalisation’ (Atkinson & Williams, 1990). Inclusive research is illustrative of changing ideas about people with learning disabilities, from subjects, to participants, to people with rights. It has been influenced by ideas developed in the disability movement which regard research as having the potential to contribute to ‘the emancipation of disabled people, as long as it is under their control’ (Oliver, 1992).

It was important that resources and outputs from Engage were also produced in creative, accessible formats to ensure that people with learning disabilities could access findings. Foulds became a voice for people with learning disabilities in the analysis process and dissemination processes and was also involved in producing toolkit videos, which are in the appendices.

Individually, Foulds grew in self-confidence across the role, started to understand more about the processes and procedures within the arts sector and organisation, appeared at a conference and co-wrote parts of the evaluation.



Peer-Researcher Experiences

In this short interview, Lauren Hall (Evaluator) and Daniel Foulds (Assistant Evaluator), reflect on the role of learning disability peer researcher.

Daniel: It has been an incredibly big learning curve working with Lauren. On a personal note, I have had to learn a lot of skills quickly to evaluate effectively. One of the tools that has been key to me evaluating is using a SWOT method to help ensure I am non-biased, and that's why I love it.

Lauren: When we first suggested this role, it was important that we practiced what we preach to venues and ensured the role was accessible, open to conversation and non-hierarchical. Although I had worked on the project three years prior to Daniel starting, Daniel brought experience from other evaluating / research roles he had been in and his lived experience of learning disability. This meant we had a new perspective within the evaluation, as well as Daniel analysing and critiquing my work to make it more accessible.

Daniel: The openness of our conversations has made the role easier; I always feel valued and never feel judged for any of my opinions and thoughts. Lauren has taken the time to teach me what might seem very basic skills, which has helped my practice and the evaluation, and broken the barrier of assuming everyone knows all about workplace skills.

Lauren: Working with Daniel has helped me work in a more organised and accessible way. I have started to communicate more clearly on tasks and take time to talk things through especially if there is a conflict around opinion or information. Daniel has also helped me to see things from different a perspective and help me to interpret data in new and different ways, as well as finding new concise methods of sharing.



Findings

Through the research methodology described above, the Engage project has identified six key findings. These are presented here, each with a case study designed to illustrate and evidence the finding in practice. Our overarching ambition with these findings is not to provide a single set methods of being or becoming an accessible venue, but rather to describe a flexible, context responsive map of best practices.

Finding 1: Embedding Inclusivity

For a long time, venues have addressed inclusion through stand-alone acts such as programming one relaxed performance a season and free carer tickets. While well-meaning and often important, these can be isolated from more systematic changes that mean they can be perceived as tokenistic. Historically, two of the partner venues had decided that they wanted to become relaxed / welcoming venues but struggled to measure this, reverting to the traditional tick box exercises.

Embedding inclusivity seeks to go beyond isolated acts of inclusion and embrace the social model of disability to ensure that individuals can engage with all aspects of a venue's operation. Rather than viewing disability as a homogenous group and using one-size-fits-all actions to create inclusion, an inclusive ethos seeks to engage directly with the individuals who are coming into a building. This opened questions of how theatres with an inclusive ethos could enhance the sense of belonging and encourage more learning disabled audiences to attend theatre, as well as increasing representation on and off-stage.

Within theatre venues, embedding inclusivity can be characterised by an ethos and environment whereby everyone, including those with learning disabilities, feel welcome and experience a sense of community and belonging. It is creating a place where everyone can feel comfortable, safe, and welcomed. Battersea Arts Centre is an example of this, launching as the world's first Relaxed Venue in February 2020, radically embedding access and inclusivity across all activities. Their method works to identify and dismantle barriers faced by disabled people, based on staff identifying disabling barriers at every level and developing creative solutions; in practical terms:

- 'Ensuring the key principles of Relaxed Performances are present for the overwhelming majority of Battersea Arts Centre's programme, including a permanent 'chill out space', availability of ear defenders, and a commitment to welcoming diverse audiences.
- Consistent ongoing offers of other types of accessible performances.
- Programming that reflects disability culture and disabled-led work.
- A range of commitments across all our management operations to ensure that access and inclusivity remains at the heart of all our structures and activity.'

Battersea Arts Centre, 2020

In conclusion, embedding inclusivity seeks to promote feelings of belonging and positive engagement across an entire organization, recognizing that learning disabilities does not describe a homogenous group and allowing people with learning disabilities to influence the decision making and planning.



Case Study 1: Leeds Playhouse Inclusive Casting

This case study examines learning between Mind the Gap and partner venue Leeds Playhouse about the difference between isolated acts of inclusion and embedding inclusivity across an entire organisation.

Leeds Playhouse has many years of experience working with people with learning disabilities. This experience has included creating the first ever Relaxed Performance over a decade ago, the Buzz programme of workshops and projects for people with learning disabilities aged 14-25, and the Beautiful Octopus Club, a twice annual club night created for and with adults with learning disabilities. Leeds Playhouse were keen to expand this work across more areas of the organisation, and to understand how they could expand opportunities for people with learning disabilities to work professionally within the organisation, both on and off stage.



One major area of change which has been brought about through the collaboration with Mind the Gap is in the representation of learning disabled actors within professional acting companies. Recently, Leeds Playhouse have worked with two professional actors, both of whom have Down Syndrome, within Playhouse shows. Anna Gray, a Mind the Gap Artist, in a production of Be My Baby; and Rebekah Hill, an artist from Dark Horse Theatre, in Oliver Twist. Leeds Playhouse worked on the casting and processes for both these shows with the expertise at Mind the Gap. From this, the Playhouse found six areas of learning:

1. Play choice and the roles within them:

- If the script doesn't have a pre-existing character with learning disabilities, think about adapting a role that makes sense to embrace a Learning Disability.
- Create a new adaptation to strip back the text to make it more accessible for performance by deaf and learning disabled actors, and think about different disabilities from the start and how they might impact on the characters and the story.

2. Auditions:

- Auditions to be playful, ensemble work, improvisation, exploring themes. Less focussed on text.

3. Creative Enablers:

- This person works closely with the Learning Disabled actor, in collaboration with the director and the rest of the company, to ensure that an actor can do their best work.

As with all actors, this support changes dependent on the needs and personality of each individual. The Creative Enabler might support artistically, keeping a record of the blocking and notes through rehearsals, reiterating instructions with more clarity, running through scenes with the actor, supporting the learning of lines, and so on. They also support in a more pastoral way, perhaps communicating with family and PAs, staying with the actor throughout the day from drop off to pick up, discussing concerns or suggesting ways to support the actor with the director and wider team, etc.

4. Rehearsal room process:

- Prior to rehearsals beginning, an access audit and conversation is undertaken with the actor, their wider support team and key members of the Playhouse team about what support needs to be put in place for that individual.
- Pre-rehearsal work was undertaken between the Creative Enabler and the actors to prep for rehearsals, perhaps reading through the script together, getting to know the building, and working to understand the health and safety rules.
- During rehearsals, modelling respect and patience is key from the director and team, and asking everyone in the room what they need to do their best work.
- Finally, it's worth thinking about socialising so that this too can be inclusive of the actor and the Creative Enabler. Advance warnings of company drinks/meals and other activity ensures they can partake in this aspect of the process too.

5. Captions:

- For both *Be My Baby* and *Oliver Twist*, creative captions have been part of the productions. Whilst these were designed to provide access for a deaf audience, we've found they have had two additional advantages for our learning disabled actors. In the early previews of *Be My Baby*, it provided a safety net in case Anna lost her lines during the show, something that rarely happened but provided some reassurance for her and the wider team. Also, where actors voice pattern or articulation can be more challenging to understand, it supported the audience to be able to fully access what both actors were saying.

6. Money:

- For many actors with learning disabilities, there's a fear about jeopardising their benefits by being paid for acting jobs. At the same time there is an ethical requirement to pay them properly. In both instances this was resolved by working with the partner organisations (Mind the Gap and Dark Horse). However, this remains an issue of scope and complexity beyond individual arts organisations.

Finding 2: Meaningful Community Engagement

During Engage, all venues spoke about the lack of high-quality learning disabled work within the UK, as there are only a handful of learning disabled theatre companies in the UK that tour work which programmers would have confidence in with regards to quality and standards. Traditionally, much work by learning disabled theatre companies is viewed by a regular audience of family and friends, seldom reaching a more general audience. Learning disability theatre companies also struggle to get work programmed within mainstream venues due to a fear of loss of income, a lack of demand from audiences to see learning disabled work and questions of quality. With more companies producing and touring professional learning disability theatre both nationally and internationally the aim is to increase audiences and the diversity of those audiences.

In 2007 Mat Fraser wrote an article titled Disability Arse. Whilst he acknowledged the safe and supportive environment that the disability arts circuit provided, Fraser said, 'some of what passes as disability art should never have been allowed on stage' (Fraser, 2007: 5). Fraser's comments usefully opened up conversations around quality of work by disabled artists. On one hand Fraser is correct, the Disability Arts and Learning Disabled theatre companies have been comfortable for too long in commissioning and sharing work by disabled artists to a public audience for a) the assurance that people with disabilities are being seen and are represented on stage and screen, and b) the sector is still caught in the applied / therapeutic process of performance rather than output quality. Although these are valuable sentiments, they have limited growth of the sector and its ability to engage with broader audiences.

Mind the Gap, through its success, has come under pressure trying to tour work to as many venues as possible, engage with communities and share its knowledge. This can be seen as a response to the desire to feed a demand for quality programming but is in some ways unsustainable. The Engage project enabled consideration of other models based upon meaningful community engagement and recognition that each partner venue had a local learning disabled theatre company:

Square Chapel:	Pennine Magpie	Gulbenkian Arts Centre:	Confidance
Leeds Playhouse:	Buzz	Northern Stage:	Lawnmowers
The Albany:	Touretteshero	Z-Arts:	DIY Theatre

When venues start to build relationships with the organisations around them, audiences and local interests inform their practice. Northern Stage demonstrated this with their accessible season launch in 2021 by inviting Lawnmowers and Twisting Ducks to perform. This not only built a relationship with the company but with the individuals who engage with the company, some of which now consult for them on access and inclusion.

There is an argument for process led work, such as Buzz Weekend Workshops at Leeds Playhouse, a drop-in session for young adults with learning disabilities. Such work may not be classed as professional practice but, for the individuals who engage, it is as important to the development of the venues inclusive practice. Making connections with local organisations and individuals allows venues to have targeted audience development, creative engagement and artist development.

Case Study 2: Z-Arts Community Creation

This case study examines how Mind the Gap and Z-Arts worked together to develop meaningful community engagement that impacted on audiences and commissioning.

Throughout the Engage project Z-Arts were incredibly successful at inviting and hosting families of children with profound learning disabilities, including at their Z-Access Days. These were relaxed days where families could attend the building, taking part in drop-in creative sessions, all for free. The venue had regular visitors to these days, and engagement was high and successful. However, the company struggled to transfer these families into audiences for visiting performances. Traditionally, Z-Arts were programming companies and shows in the building and trying to sell tickets once releasing the programme.



Mind the Gap worked with Z-Arts to connect further with the families they engaged with. This included exploring times of performances, types of performances, and the comfort of families (including exploring relaxed performances). However, Z-Arts still questioned the work they could programme, due to the quality of learning disabled theatre and the lack of representation in theatre specifically for young people.

Through community connection, Z-Arts had from Z-Access Days and connections Mind the Gap had facilitated, such as with DIY Theatre (Manchester) and JoAnne Haines (Artist), Z-Arts began increasing representation of artists with learning disabilities at their Z-Access Days. This then extended to asking these communities what they wanted to come and watch as audiences, and creating commissions for local artists ensuring that learning disabled / disabled artists were included in the commissions.

Finding 3: Learning Disabled Leadership

A specific aim of Engage was for artists with learning disabilities to have raised expectations and ambitions. In 2018, the Leadership Commission report published *Leaders Like You*, which suggested that significant challenges are faced by people with disabilities whether they are already occupying, looking to move towards, or contributing to leadership roles. Through conversations with Mind the Gap Artists, we discovered that these challenges included having anxieties about, and facing obstacles around, questions of personal development, career prospects, payment, the perceived capacity to lead and to travel - as well as questions of support and resources for support. Also included was the issue of self-censorship: people with learning disabilities often lack the confidence to apply for leadership roles due to concerns about the conventional ability/disability perceptions of others.

Throughout Engage, this has been done through mainstream theatres and organisations advocating for learning disabled participation and leadership, rather than only learning disabled people and the organisations that work with them.

Engage has found three key learnings regarding learning disabled leadership:

1. A person-centred training plan for people with learning disabilities is necessary.
2. Organisations need connections with companies who may work with learning disabled leaders.
3. The definition of leadership needs to evolve.

Mind the Gap has worked extensively with their own students and Artists, including embedding leadership training within their Academy programme, to develop leadership skills. The company also worked with community partners across Engage to give local learning disabled groups / companies opportunities for performance and, additionally, to have their voices heard and give feedback and suggestions around access and inclusion, deepening relationships with local communities. Many of the venues would not have achieved such deep connections, or as much practical engagement activity, without Mind the Gap's Creative Engagement Coordinator facilitating conversations, activity and relationships. This is where organisations need better connections with companies who can suggest learning disabled leaders, and who have the knowledge and experience to support and aid these leadership roles.

Finally, part of the process of addressing this has been to start to change our understandings of what leadership consists of, with traditional models being outdated and inaccessible. This includes embracing some of the post-Covid changes in flexible and adaptive working and creating more humane and socially sustainable leadership propositions. Companies such as Mind the Gap and Access All Areas have sought to challenge stereotypical perceptions of leaders, and leadership practice, to diversify what leaders look like in the arts sector. This includes recognising the value of the unique life experiences and different ways of thinking

that people with learning disabilities bring to leadership roles. Furthermore, leadership doesn't require total independence. People with learning disabilities in leadership roles are still entitled to support. Interdependent relationships are more adaptable with all parties being dependent on each other, and also bringing their own skills and knowledge. Interdependent relationships across an organisation does not mean taking away the voice of a leader with a learning disability, but rather enabling new methods and models of thinking and sharing those thoughts collaboratively. Post-Engage, the question is how do we ensure voices are not being silenced and we are supporting leadership roles in an ethically valid, non-tokenistic way?

Case Study 3: Mind the Gap Artists as Leaders

This case study examines how Mind the Gap Artists embraced leadership throughout the project.

Across the project lifetime, Mind the Gap Artists embraced their position as Artists and audiences with learning disabilities presenting at conferences, auditing venues and co-publishing academic papers.

During all three sharing events, Mind the Gap Artists were central: some working front of house, some facilitating roundtable conversations and some presenting / hosting the event on stage. The voices of learning disabled artists was integral to all events, and training for these roles was made possible by partner venues including takeover events at Square Chapel Arts Centre, Halifax. Mind the Gap Artists travelled to Square Chapel to work within Front of House in roles such as box office, steward, bar assistant and usher at certain events. From these experiences, Mind the Gap Artists had the knowledge and confidence to lead within some of these roles, interdependently, at Engage events.

Mind the Gap Artists also worked as focus groups auditing partner venues, examples of this are as follows:

- Josh Coulthard (MTG Associate Artist) ran access audits across all venues with Vicky Ackroyd.
- Daniel Foulds (MTG Associate Artist) ran access audits at Z-Arts and Northern Stage.
- Five Mind the Gap Artists co-facilitated Engage's online training, Equality In This New World, to all partner venues.
- Mind the Gap Artists audited Northern Stage's digital offer during the pandemic, sending feedback to inform future web development.
- Mind the Gap Artists sent information about the re-opening of venues to all partners, including their concerns about Covid and how venues could re-open their doors as a more inclusive venue.

Finally, much of Engage focused on what relaxed performances / venues were, and who they were for. Paul Wilshaw (Mind the Gap's Assistant Producer) became increasingly interested in this topic. Therefore, alongside Engage, Paul Wilshaw co-authored an academic paper with Lauren Hall (York St John University PhD Student) exploring the experiences Paul had as an audience member, and his opinions on theatres' and venues' attempts to address disability and engage disabled audiences.

Wilshaw, P & Hall, L (2022). Relaxed: A Conversation on whether learning disabled audiences want them, Routledge Companion to Audiences.



Finding 4: Institutional Knowledge

Throughout this project, staff turnover was high both within Mind the Gap and all the partner organisations. Within the arts sector this can be common due to the uncertainty of funding, fixed term contracts, low pay, as well as personal ambition. All factors were exacerbated during Covid-19. In the context of Engage, it became apparent that when it came to questions of inclusion and learning disabilities, in many instances there was just one person holding most of the knowledge within the organisation. Consequently, if they left, that knowledge went with them. Through this project it became clear that organisational knowledge, access and inclusion dedication were significantly and negatively impacted as a result of staff turnover.

Maintaining this knowledge and expertise is a critical part of ensuring access and inclusion is embedded across an organisation, with employees being informed by what has come before and having a joint understanding built up within the shared workplace. Institutional knowledge is the sum of information a company and its employees possesses; it is a collective memory of the company. Organisations with effective knowledge management strategies, ensure that expertise spreads throughout the workforce including within their induction packs, their access meetings, and the inclusive ethos they hold. Conversely, organisations without appropriate information-sharing strategies allow institutional knowledge to remain with only a few vital employees, leaving that organisation vulnerable to losing all essential information.

This knowledge can be split into two categories: explicit knowledge and implicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge refers to knowledge that is easy to articulate, store and share with new people. This could be through documentation such as Z-Arts accessible induction pack,

which includes their strategic plan and policies and procedures. Implicit knowledge refers to how explicit knowledge is applied in real-world scenarios – this is based on experience and requires training and mentorship to maintain.

Engage found that implicit institutional knowledge is easier to lose during employee turnover. Many venues had extensive documentation about access and inclusion, including policies around learning disability programmes and engagement, however newer staff found it more difficult to find specific details that improved experiences for people with learning disabilities. This also included losing personal connections with individuals who used to engage with venues, or relationships breaking down with local community groups / partner organisations. These potential knowledge gaps can cause significant harm to the organisation and the communities they engage with.

These knowledge gaps also became isolated to different departments without key connective staff to facilitate sharing. Engage discovered that Front of House staff and Creative / Community Engagement staff held the most implicit knowledge around learning disability, however departments such as marketing did not. This led to slower operations and, occasionally, disappointing outcomes.

Maintaining knowledge within venues and organisations could lead to a more consistent approach to access and inclusion, meaning new staff and departments do not have to feel like they are starting from the ground up. Engage allowed for knowledge sharing within its network of venues, meaning experts from each venue were sharing and learning across a UK network. Internally, venues started to set up access and inclusion meetings which crossed departments making it a priority within the organisation and on the agenda for all departments. Finally, Mind the Gap became a subject matter expert, leveraging their knowledge to help define new procedures. This was done through workshops, materials, and open conversations to take their deep understanding of learning disability and filter it through the company's pre-existing operations.

In conclusion, a critical factor of institutional knowledge is communication. Even if you have an expert sharing knowledge, this knowledge must be shared across departments to ensure all staff are working towards the same goal whilst hopefully not being impacted by staff turnover. Organisations need a continual and proactive approach to saving institutional knowledge to prevent the gradual loss of information such as training, succession planning and a culture of learning and sharing.

Case Study 4: The Albany

This case study explores how, despite staff turnover, The Albany were able to develop institutional knowledge through consistent relationships with learning disability partner organisations.

In 2019, The Albany in London wanted to put a call-out for their Rebels season. This was for an artist with a learning disability to be commissioned to make a piece of work which would be performed within The Albany. Mind the Gap worked with The Albany creating the call-out, looking at terminology used and exploring the criteria and context. Mind the Gap also worked with local learning disabled organisations and artists to spread the word of the commission. However, despite this groundwork only a handful of people applied, with questions of whether their medical diagnosis was included in the definition of learning disability.



The commission went ahead with Vicky Ackroyd supporting the artist remotely. This included check-ins and communicating with the venue any concerns that might occur. The commission included space, financial support for props, costume, etc., and tutoring from in-house producers. Unfortunately, the commission did not meet completion due to several factors that Mind the Gap then worked on with The Albany:

1. Although the venue had full intentions of supporting the artist, it wasn't personalised support. The individual in question needed more in-person support, and the process was quite lonely for an individual creating a one-person show.
2. The commission had set parameters of what was offered. Although ensuring that the commission did not impact on the benefits system, more work was needed in finding out what the artist would benefit from (more time with staff, more space etc).
3. A relationship wasn't formed with the individual. They did not feel part of the building or supported fully in the work they were making.

From these reflections, Mind the Gap worked with The Albany to create more inclusive procedures. This included taking a person-centered approach to commissions, employment and contracting. For example, The Albany now has an area in visiting companies contracts about being a relaxed venue. Although this is a written procedure, part of the process is to sit down with visiting companies to discuss what this means for both the company and The Albany, ensuring everyone understands and has what they need.

From the start of this commission in 2019 to present day (2022), the staff from The Albany and the staff working on Engage with Mind the Gap changed multiple times and there was a risk of knowledge being lost, or starting from scratch. However The Albany and Mind the Gap maintained a strong relationship with each other to continuously share knowledge, as well as The Albany's relationship with Heart n Soul evolving. The Albany also built relationships with Touretteshero and aimed to produce All Sorts; an accessible summer programme in 2021. This was sadly cancelled due to Covid-19, however there are plans to produce it in the future. These consistent relationships with learning disability partner organisations ensured up-to-date knowledge was available, including around definitions of learning disability and terminology.

Although The Albany hasn't had a dedicated learning disabled commission since 2019, all advertisements for commissions have been inclusive and have been taken to communities and artists rather than left for people to find. They also have longer advertisement time and applications can be made in multiple formats including video, audio recording and phone call.

Finding 5: Collaborative Practice

One of the most significant outcomes of Engage was the development of the network of Mind the Gap and six partner venues. While collaborative practice is a familiar part of art making processes, this project asserts its value in arts and cultural management, particularly in relation to venues and organisations working together to share best practice and creating a safe space for discussion around access and inclusion. As discussed above this is particularly vital in terms of addressing the challenges of maintaining institutional knowledge, with the potential for this to be shared across a hive-mind of partners.

Although within the arts sector it is extremely common for organisations to collaborate creatively, at the start of the project it became clear that most organisations did not work collaboratively in an administrative and managerial way. This meant all venues who wanted to become more accessible and inclusive were starting from scratch, especially when it came to programming relaxed performances and becoming a relaxed venue.

Mind the Gap facilitated relationship building across all partner venues through introductions, online meetups, and physical events to build investment across a range of venues. This meant sub-groups were created, including relaxed performances, programming and inclusive employment. Mind the Gap held sub-group sharings which were online meetings where venues could present resources they had created or barriers they had come across and other venues could contribute ideas, ask questions and support with guidance. This developed into a shared space where resources such as relaxed performance guidelines copy, contracting for visiting companies and inclusive induction packs were shared, with the intent of people using them within their own organisational setting.

Collaborative behaviours became the bedrock of effective outcomes. This hasn't always been encouraged or rewarded within the arts sector which relies on personal and organisational accountability. Through venues across the UK creating an access and inclusion network, with the support of Mind the Gap, tools to promote participation were developed, and disability-inclusive policies for theatres were developed and implemented within venues. These regular interactions between venues with common goals allowed an acceleration in producing administrative and managerial resources in relation to access and inclusion, and confidence in resources made.

Case Study 6: Gulbenkian Arts Centre & Confidence

This case study explores how, through collaboration, Gulbenkian Arts Centre & Confidence shared knowledge, expertise and resources to support each other's ambitions.

Confidence is a dance company for people with learning disabilities based in Canterbury and therefore, had previous interactions with Gulbenkian Arts Centre in the same city. However, in interviews, both parties would describe the relationship as 'using each other' rather than working collaboratively. In 2020, Confidence became a formal collaborator in the Engage project, with Artistic Director Jo Frater working within Engage (and with Mind the Gap) to better support partner venues in the South of England.



Throughout Engage, Confidence would support Gulbenkian Arts Centre with conversations around access and inclusion with their staff team. In particular, supporting the creation and running of their Access Group. The Access Group is a vehicle to prioritise access and inclusion across the entire organisation, as well as providing an opportunity to talk with people with learning disabilities about their experiences of visiting the building, as audience members and as performers. At the same time, Gulbenkian Arts Centre provided space for Confidence to rehearse / perform in their space and consulted the company in regards to programming work, and their relaxed performances.

The relationship grew from this model of exchange to a more collaborative process of planning the future ahead. This included Confidence being invited to National Portfolio Organisation planning meetings for Gulbenkian Arts Centre to share in the future of the organisation and

where Confidance could realistically sit in that. Confidance shared future producing plans with Gulbenkian Arts Centre to find space, money and programme opportunities for the company, as well as working together to create opportunities for learning disabled adults, as artists and for consultation.

Throughout the project, the quality of this relationship has improved with each party working to understand each other's needs.

Finding 6: University Knowledge Exchange

The external evaluation of Engage has been conducted by York St John University and formed the basis for a multi-dimensional and mutually beneficial partnership between Mind the Gap and the University. This innovative partnership has enabled the project to access additional funding, undertake different projects and contribute to research that has gone far beyond that of an evaluation in terms of developing understanding of artists with a learning disability and career development.

The evaluation itself was incorporated into a full-time PhD studentship, with Mind the Gap funding the stipend and York St John University providing a fee waiver (additional funding value £13,200). Conducted by Lauren Hall, this research was supervised by Professor Matthew Reason and Professor Nick Rowe.

Recognising the exclusion of learning disabled artists from mainstream education and training, since 1998 Mind the Gap have provided training opportunities for learning disabled artists. While of high quality these courses have previously not had formal recognition. The Engage programme and partnership with York St John University provided a new impetus to address this and the development of a new programme, validated in 2021. This Level 4 Certificate in Higher Education qualification is equivalent to a first year undergraduate programme and the first degree level course of its kind in the UK. Mind the Gap Academy students are now officially university students, with the vital educational capital and value that this delivers. This has also been the basis for staff and student exchanges/placements between Mind the Gap and York St John University. A journal article co-authored by Mind the Gap and York St John University reflects on the process of validation, specifically on developing inclusive assessment: [Reason and Ward 2021](#)

The decision to work with York St John University shows the value of an academic partnership that goes beyond the strictly transactional relationship of a fixed-term evaluation. The partnership provided mutual benefits to both organisations, with the Engage project providing the formal underpinning on which these could be built and accelerated. The learning and relationship will be ongoing.

Case Study 6: Creative Doodle Book

This case study examines how two-way knowledge exchange between York St John University and Mind the Gap enabled the development of a high-impact response to Covid-19 lockdowns.

The Creative Doodle Book is a multi-element collaboration between Mind the Gap and York St John University, undertaken by Professor Matthew Reason. It was originally developed in 2018-19 as a way of supporting learning disabled artists' reflective practice and was utilised in residencies and within Mind the Gap Academy.



In 2020, following the introduction of lockdowns and social distancing in response to Covid-19, Mind the Gap recognised the potential value of the Doodle Book in supporting online creative practice. On the basis of this Mind the Gap and York St John University collaborated on a successful application the UK Research and Innovation's Covid-19 response fund for a project exploring inclusive online community arts through the form of the Creative Doodle Book (additional funding value £65,494). Over the course of this project over 3,500 Creative Doodle Books were distributed to arts organisations, community groups and schools with over 100 online workshops delivered to 31 partners across the UK. This included the Engage partner venues who were sent copies of the Doodle Book during lockdown periods.

The project has produced a number of outputs, including blogs, video documentation and academic articles examining the development of inclusive online arts practices:

- [Together While Apart: Creative Doodle Book report and film](#)
- Reason, M (2022). 'Inclusive online community arts: COVID and beyond COVID.' Cultural Trends. Academic article.
- [Reason, M \(2021\). 'The Equity of Zoom: Reflections on Delivering Inclusive Arts online during Covid-19 Lockdowns.' Disability Arts Online](#)
- [Reason, M \(2021\). 'Still not Seen or Heard: The voice and experience of people with learning disabilities during Covid-19.' Pandemic and Beyond](#)
- [Podcast. Pandemic and Beyond Episode 10: The Creative Doodle Book, with Victoria Tischler interviewing Matthew Reason and Vicky Ackroyd. 2021](#)

Conclusion & Legacy

This report evidences the rich and diverse impacts of Engage including specific projects, artistic commissions and other activities. Alongside this has been the development of a network focusing on issues of learning disability inclusion that has not been seen before. This included sharing resources, findings, difficulties and starting collaborative practice, especially regarding relaxed venues. It is worth acknowledging that all this occurred during a period of significant disruption caused by Covid-19, including the temporary closure of theatres in 2020. This led to a shift to streamed and digital performances that, in many instances, increased the accessibility of theatre performance and provided space and impetus across the sector to reflect on equality and inclusion. Post-Covid there is potential for the sector to rebuild differently, in a manner that embeds inclusivity and diversity with arts organisations' strategic planning and operation in all levels.

The establishment of a network of arts organisations through Engage initially operated in a 'spoke-and-wheel' model, with Mind the Gap at the centre as a driving force, holder of knowledge and stimulator of activity. One legacy of Engage is that this has started to change, with Mind the Gap no longer a rare voice advocating for learning disabled artists and audiences as venues are increasingly taking this up themselves. The network of venues, with regular online meet ups and annual conferences, also held partner venues accountable with tangible change happening each year including casting learning disabled artists, commissioning learning disabled artists, setting up access meetings, deepening relationships with communities, and creating more inclusive employment processes.

Another important outcome was recognition and celebration that access and inclusion is not a one-size-fits-all process. Every venue works in a bespoke and unique way dependent on funding, geography, economic location, target audience, producing or programming, available space etc. In the same way, many learning disabled theatre companies and organisations work with a person-centred approach. Engage has confirmed that venues need to be supported in the same way. It is possible to provide blanket information such as the social model of disability, current terminology and understanding of access needs. However due to the nature of learning disability not being a homogenous group, each venue needs the support, both with knowledge and resources, to create bespoke new methodologies of working with people with learning disabilities - as audiences, as artists and as participants.

As always, people are nervous. The project found staff nervous about getting things wrong, or losing money. The finances, although still extremely difficult (including paying artists on benefits), can be aided by including access in the budget right at the beginning of a project. In terms of getting things wrong, Engage found that this was inevitable as people and organisations will get things wrong. However, with open, reflective attitudes, it was also an opportunity for learning. Until venues start to try things, the arts sector is never going to make progress for people with learning disabilities.

“You will get things wrong, because something that might help one person will put up a barrier for someone else. But if you are talking, asking questions, and you are willing to confront how things could change - you are making progress.” (Paul Wilshaw, Assistant Producer at Mind the Gap, 2020).



Credits...

Written by: Lauren Hall

Photography: Marianne Chua, Jim Higham, Pablo Larossa, David Lindsay, Ben Pugh, Anthony Robling, Tom Woollard.

Design: Rob Abbey

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Links to appendices...



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