

Transcript: Callaloo Carnival Arts 'Action Research: Embedding Access into Practice'

Presentation by Marina Poppa at The Open Road Carnival Conference (North), 12th March 2022. Hosted by Callaloo Carnival Arts

This is what I really wanted to talk to you about for the rest of our section of the day was about how we've come to understand access as something that we can actually embed into our practice, rather than what I think, to be fair, we used to do was plan a Mas or a parade or an event and go, "Right then, what are we going to do about access?" and in fact that's the wrong way around.

We've realised that you can start with access and put that at the beginning and think about all the audiences' needs and the participants' needs and as you build your plans you can look at how access is going to be embedded into that practice right from the start.

So this research was testing a particular tool called 'access riders' which we've got more information about in our resource pack which Jasmine is going to put a link to in the chat later on today, aren't you Jasmine? And we will be giving out that resource pack to people in the room.

We tested access riders because we believed we'd read about them and we thought, "Oh this sounds like a fantastic tool!" but in fact, without going into boring detail, we didn't find them especially useful in of themselves as a rider.

In fact none of us are using them with each other and in our practice day-to-day but we will use them for external providers so we might we might collect our access requirements into a document that we send out to other providers when we're going to somewhere where they don't know us, or to let people know ahead of time what we need.

So an access rider, for anyone who isn't familiar with them, it's just a document people might be familiar with the term 'rider' that people use at festivals - I think because Mariah Carey was very famous for having a very long list of things that she required when she appears anywhere but disabled artists have been using access riders to talk about what their requirements are in order to enable us to do our best work.

So we tested this with our Mas, in the process of making this Mas both with the participants and then later when we took it out onto the road. But we found really, to cut a long story short, that people just weren't there yet we weren't ready to use access riders because we weren't even comfortable with using the terms about disability.

We weren't comfortable talking to each other about our impairments, some of us are and Clare - we quite often talk about bladder and bowel issues, don't we?

We probably bonded over bowel issues more than anything else [audience laughs] just simply because if you've got a similar impairment it won't necessarily mean that you've got the same requirements but what it will mean is that you're probably a bit more comfortable talking about that particular set of challenges and I can tell you for sure that if your challenges involve anything to do with toilets, bowels and things to do with what you do in the toilet or how often you have to go to the toilet then it's quite difficult to talk about that in a public setting.

You know I'm doing it now!

[audience laughs]

I've been dealing with that for 20, 30 years so I'm used to it but in polite company you never really know how much is too much information so we tend not to speak about our issues until we need to and that can be quite a problem.

So when you meet another person who says, "Oh I've just got this issue" then it's quite good and a relief because you can talk honestly to that person.

So on this slide, I'm gonna press on a little because I don't want to but take us over time, this slide says that most of us love making Mas, as you'll have noticed, okay that large scale work is quite challenging. So for those of us with capacity issues, if we can't stand for too long or if we can't stand at all, then we have to think about where and how are we going to make this stuff in a seated position.

We make adjustments to support people and we do that so that people can do their best work, not because we're 'nice' or even really just because it's a legal

requirement - although I should say that it is a legal requirement so we do have to do it - but we do it because we should do it and also because if we didn't do it then people who are disabled wouldn't be able to be part of our group and we would lose out.

So there's a business case for it really, if you leave out disabled people then you're shutting out a quarter of the population potentially so from a business point of view if we're all about engagement and inclusion and reaching people, which in Carnival that's often what we flag up that we do well, then we definitely have to reach disabled people.

So some of the things that we needed to make, some of the adjustments we needed to make were to allow extra time. Sessions shouldn't start too early, some people just don't get going early on a morning, need to and make sure that you don't start too early in the morning

and also don't finish too late because people get very tired and tiredness doesn't just mean, "Oh, I feel a bit tired, I'm a bit bored" or I need to sit down for like in a sort of average, typical way that you maybe used to think about being tired when you're at school and you've done some homework or something but tired in a chronic fatigue way

or in a way that might mean that it becomes dangerous for you to continue. So it really is important when somebody says that they need to sit down or that they need to finish and take a break that you don't wait until it becomes dangerous and provide snacks because we need to keep our energy levels up.

The mental health and well-being aspect of our work means that we try really hard to foster a culture of allowing people to make mistakes, so we learn by doing and we need to be allowed to make mistakes so we now call them 'learning opportunities' so that people feel that it's okay

and it still, still amazes me how perfectionist we are in society and in art that just doesn't work and especially with groups of people who have often been told that they don't fit in, that they're 'wrong', that they're no good at art or no good at anything. It's extra important to allow mistakes - and laugh about them!

Big tasks, big complex tasks such as making this enormous goldfinch puppet need to be broken down into small chunks that make them more manageable.

Music - we use music to keep us going and to lift up our energy levels a little. Sometimes we need quiet so we don't have music blaring out all the time and we think about pace.

Yeah, I've put at the bottom I need to work sitting down and it was just a picture of me standing up [audience laughs] but, in fact, I would stand up, do some work and then go away and have a bit of a sit down.

So I'll get to the next slide which is a list of all the things which the lovely Alison Duddle, who's pictured here holding up a pair of wings that either she or we have just made, this is a list of the things that artists can do to help, artists and facilitators, producers can do to help us do our best work.

It says, "Give us wings and we'll fly" that's a joke there!

Make lists, use highlighters that helps us to pick out the important information better, be patient, supportive, turn up on time and then you can finish on time - that's really important for our energy levels communicate plans clearly, give constructive feedback, use gentle humour and music and make spaces that are safe for all of us and one last thing that we do a lot is facilitate home working.

So I have actually run out of time now, but I'm gonna just say that this is a picture of the goldfinch puppet's first outing but I don't need to talk about what's on this slide because you've already seen that on the films.

