

Helix Arts: Collaborative Curation & Learning Disabilities



Helix Arts is the creative broker connecting high-quality participatory arts with diverse groups of people, of whatever age and ability, to make great art.

The bursary activity aimed to increase our knowledge, expertise and networks of curation across platforms – onsite and on line – to showcase artwork of people with learning disabilities.

This would lead to increased understanding of how to support people with learning disabilities to share their artwork on an equal platform with other art makers and build audiences for it.

Activity

Helix Arts undertook an action research approach. The cyclical nature of our investigation helped us to understand insights gained early on in the project and design later stages accordingly.

Activities encompassed:

- Desktop research

- Focus groups with learning-disabled artists
- Individual meetings
- Group reflection sessions with partners
- Filming to document work

Partners:

- Prof. Beryl Graham – New Media Art, Sunderland University
- Susie O’Hara – Curator of Thinking Digital Arts
- Twisting Ducks Theatre Company
- TIN Arts
- NOVAK
- Dr. Dominic Smith – artist/curator

Others organisations we spoke to:

- Artichoke
- Events International
- Southpaw Dance Company

Learning and Insight

Our starting point was to consider the platforms people with learning disabilities want, and use, to share their artwork with others.

Platforms were dependent on varied intentions for creating artwork. Our first insight was the key role curatorial sensitivity plays in untangling the intentions of learning-disabled artists, and, aligning them to the context in which the artwork is made. Content has to have meaning for the maker, and a reason for an audience to watch, listen or take part.

For *Twisting Ducks Theatre Company*, their intentions were to change perceptions of people with learning disabilities and attract big audiences.

“We’re starting local, then national, then....who knows?”.

Creative Case NORTH



For TIN Arts' Flex Dance Company, which has had success in attracting big audiences at outdoor festivals, it was to be recognised for artistic excellence and to place the artwork before the disability.

This led us to consider expectations of quality and commercial appeal when making work for large audiences. Helen Marriage, Artichoke Artistic Director, said curation for outdoor events embodies "the best possible exposition of the artist's work".

What impact does this have on the artistic practice of someone with learning disabilities, who considers themselves an artist? Street audiences vote with their feet. Art critics can consider aesthetic merit. The commissioner cares about audience reach.

Are people with learning disabilities and the organisations supporting them, ready to consider this? If so, we need enhanced curatorial support for the creative practices of people with learning disabilities before we can improve access to artistic platforms.



Impact

Implemented

We have initiated an opportunity for an artist with learning disabilities to develop their artistic practice. The goal is to support them in fundraising for a project which includes an Arts Council England Grants for the Arts application.

We have taken knowledge gained about curation to support Twisting Ducks' understanding of audience, the artistic ecology they are part of and the context in which they create artwork.

We are refreshing our Quality Framework to formalise our knowledge and practices of curatorial decision-making in relation to intention and context.

Strengthening Our Approach

This research has revealed gaps in provision and opportunities for Helix Arts to support organisations to curate and platform artwork made by learning-disabled artists.

We have strengthened our knowledge and networks, creating better opportunities for creative programming, in partnership with people with learning disabilities.

Our learning has exposed us to the nuanced role the curator plays in helping an audience find meaning in artists' work. Now, Helix is better positioned to develop curatorial approaches that support artists with learning disabilities.

Embedding Learning

We are planning to build strategic national links with outdoor cultural festival curators to develop new partnerships in relation to talent development of artists with learning disabilities.

We will explore the role Helix Arts could take in making online platforms more accessible for people with learning disabilities to showcase their work. Reaching an audience via a digital platform can remove constraints of tight deadlines, rigid working hours, the ability to travel independently and offers the chance to find audiences with specialist interests across the globe.

We will build a curatorial mentor model for artists with learning disabilities. This will open up new progression routes for artists with learning disabilities to access mainstream cultural opportunities.

Intention, context and quality are deciding factors when it comes to dissemination of artwork. This has a major impact upon the opportunities for people with learning disabilities to make and share artwork. In conducting this research, we have learned that curatorial skills can play an essential role in equality and diversity in the cultural sector. For Helix Arts, diversity is an opportunity.

Find Out More

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Further information:

A film documenting the activity of Helix Arts bursary activity will be available on our website by May 1st 2016.