

Can everybody participate?

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There is a lot of movement when it comes to inclusion, especially in the cultural field. Much is being done, tried, failed, evaluated and reinvented. Nevertheless, it takes courage to take a stand. *Inclusion* and *accessibility* are emotionally charged words. They sit in a vast spectrum of connotations and have unfortunately also been eroded in the meantime. The outcomes of the research project *The Wednesdays* are therefore not instructions. They are questions which serve models for organizations, companies and artists to name, clarify and further develop their own interpretation of methods of inclusion.

The Bachelor Dance program at the Royal Conservatory of Antwerp (KCA) and research group CORPoREAL are exploring the resonance of inclusive practices. They strive for a sustainable development and implementation of accessibility within the program and the broader performing arts. The next step in that development was the research project *The Wednesdays*, spread in 5 modules of workshop sessions over the course of the 2022-2023 academic year. For each module, an external expert was invited to work with a mixed-abled group of Bachelor students and guest dancers. The project departed from movement and then connected with other disciplines. The focus was on artistic encounter and development. Inclusive practices formed the outlines. Questions such as, “How do I dance with someone who has a different sensory

perception?”, “What is it like to dance in a wheelchair?” etc... were part of the process, but never the starting point for the work.

As principal investigator of *The Wednesdays*, I alternated between the role of observer and participant to fully experience the process. Together with Saïd Gharbi I led the first module. Then came Kinga Jaczevska, Quan Bui Ngoc, Lisa Nienhuis and finally Lisi Estaras and Elie Tass. They brought their own practice and network of guest dancers into the workshops.

It was an ambitious project that sought to provide students and guest dancers with a process-oriented environment and space to develop skills that receive less attention in curricula. In addition, the research also explored opportunities for talented dance artists with different abilities, backgrounds, cultures and practices than the usual dance student to pursue a Bachelor of Dance education at KCA. What drove me the most as a researcher was the intention to use accessibility as a starting point, inviting teachers and students (including those from other departments) in the hope that the entire school would be imbued with the idea that inclusion is essential in arts education (and in society). In addition to the sessions themselves, the research found output in the connection with other course sections, such as the solo site-specific performances and end-of-year performances.

It can be that simple

The initial outcomes of *The Wednesdays* are principles that sometimes seem obvious, but are by no means so.

Interdisciplinary work creates a basis for equality because the focus is on creation and performance and less on the technical aspects of performing arts. The difference between non-disabled and disabled dancers is less perceived as a barrier when the dancers are challenged to write, speak, act, etc, because the participants are exploring a practice in which they all have less experience. Similarly, a group of authors or poets begins to create in a more open and equal way when they are challenged to move. The group experiences the sense of discovery together. Technical skill is sometimes a barrier to inclusion because it can create a sense of inferiority in otherwise developed artists.

The focus on **creation in group** rather than individual assignments paves the way for encounter and for deeper personal connection between participants, greatly enhancing accessibility. It feeds participants' alertness to the needs of others that may not be named more quickly and it lowers the threshold for naming those unnoticed needs. Moreover, it allows the workshop leader to focus more on artistic development and creation, as certain aspects of inaccessibility are absorbed by the group itself. More individually focused assignments can foster fear of failure and undermine group dynamics.

During one of the modules, a session was overwhelmed by insecurities because the

workshop leader was specifically focusing on the precise performance of a particular choreography. The group was told that those who could not follow (in terms of technique or endurance) could sit on the side and observe, which felt to many like a form of exclusion. It was immediately noticeable how - among both students and guest dancers - some people isolated themselves and others focused on those they had known the longest. The close group bond that had been forged in earlier sessions crumbled quickly. It is essential to balance challenges for the whole group.

In addition to creating in group, **actively encouraging interaction and encounter** is a rewarding basis for building accessibility. Switching partners or groups often during a session (this can be done after each task but also at seemingly random moments, or by suggesting that you work with the person you know least) lowers the threshold for social interaction and can allow people with less confidence to get over this barrier more quickly.

The **naming of the principles of one's own teaching practice** by a workshop leader provides clarity and can prevent people from becoming insecure through their own interpretation of assignments or comments. People with different sensory, mental, social or movement abilities are more at risk of settling into a position of powerlessness.

One of the teachers immediately emphasized in her module that she would often direct participants verbally, but that for her

those comments served as 'input' and not 'feedback.' In this way, her spontaneous comments did not have to be understood as, 'you're not doing what I expect you to do,' but as, 'I'm observing what you're doing and that triggers this impulse in me.'

A **safe space** begins with the introduction to the space in which a group of people work together. Light, sound, ventilation and freedom of movement are the basis for enabling creativity. In addition, clear and open communication is vital to ensure that (inevitable) conflicts, problems or shortcomings surface quickly and can be addressed. Often safety and inclusion are about how we ourselves deal with structural and (sometimes unavoidable) situations of inaccessibility.

The alternation of **verbal and nonverbal** communication reinforces the message. Not everyone has access to linguistic content to understand complex assignments. This does not only apply to the workshop leader. Also, if participants speak a different language (literally or in terms of register), they need more time for partner and group work. In addition, the moving body is a powerful and endlessly resourceful tool to support verbal information and can even be an alternative for times when spoken language is inadequate.

Translation is the responsibility of the workshop leader, but can also be helped along by the group itself. This may involve literal translation for non-native speakers, or it may involve translating complex ideas or technical jargon into a more simple formulation. People do not always feel free to interrupt an explanation when they have not understood something. Checking often if someone needs translation or help is essential.

Sometimes certain assignments become overly complicated in the quest for acces-

sibility. Experienced workshop leaders continue to translate their thinking, ideas and assignments to their essence and seek different forms to pass them on to a diverse group of people. These forms are often provided by participants themselves.

Time is even more relative in a context of accessibility than elsewhere. In mixed-abled groups, it is critical to balance the challenge for people with different levels of experience and different sensory, mental, social or movement abilities. The ideal rhythm of participants can vary greatly.

Many ways have been developed in arts education to accommodate this. However, there is no universal plug-in approach. Limiting (consistently and clearly) work time for assignments is stimulating for some groups and paralyzing for others. Free interpretation in which you as a workshop leader make the group wait until everyone has a certain result can cause some in the group to feel unchallenged and others to freeze because of performance pressure. What paid off the most during *The Wednesdays* is, on the one hand, to never attach a volume to the assignment (a choreography can always be short or long, a text should not have a certain minimum of words or sentences, etc.) and, on the other hand, to divide assignments into smaller steps so that different rhythms of creation compensate for each other. Some create movement faster, others create text faster.

Within the session, it's about giving people time to be creative, for translation and for breaks. However, time is also critical in skill development. A dance duet between a wheelchair-using dancer and an able-bodied dancer requires sufficient time to understand each other's movement language. Participants must be given time to build the required technique and communication. Teachers must be given sufficient time to

explore a transition to mixed-abled groups and shape their practice accordingly.

When the focus is on **the process**, as during The Wednesdays, it is difficult as a workshop leader to pursue a concrete outcome. What matters is that people themselves see and experience the added value of the encounter. Feedback from the participants of The Wednesdays showed that some students did not make the switch to a process-oriented mindset until the end of the sessions, presumably because their training often requires them to work and think result-oriented.

At the end of each module, we asked participants to create a description of the process that connected to the content in terms of form. A day in your life, an imaginary journey, a letter to your future self or a conversation with your mirror image. The description tried to transform the physical experience of the module into language. Here are some quotes from the different letters:

- ‘Safe space that defends freedom, provokes inspiration and reflects creativity.’
- “I woke up as a question mark and went to sleep as a present.
- ‘I have wondered, I have not understood, I have not understood and yet done it, I have understood doing, I have done and I have stayed confused.’
- ‘I have felt inside of something, I have felt outside of something, I have felt like I was the something.’
- ‘I have connected to others in order to connect to myself.’
- ‘How to feel excluded and happy at the same time.’
- ‘All the material we worked on needed collaboration, empathy and compassion to be executed.... that is very special considering the world we live in.’
- ‘The work completely destroys “the me” and looks for “the us” in dance.’
- ‘Thank you for these sessions, keep the kindness and the softness.’
- ‘Run, fun, kiwi.’

Four questions

Based on observation and participation in the modules, interviews with the workshop leaders and feedback from participants, I drew up four questions. They form a basis on which organizations, companies or individual artists can question themselves before, during and after the (creative) process in terms of accessibility. These are guiding questions for which there are no unequivocal answers. They offer a model to name and clarify the interpretation of inclusion, and serve as a reference for all those involved (internal or external).

From what vision do we develop our inclusive practice and how do we achieve it?

There is a huge range of conceivable motivations for making an organization and operation more accessible. It can come from a personal commitment, a social, political, cultural and/or artistic motivation. It can be a deep conviction of equity and justice in the arts and society. An inquiry into accessibility can deepen the creative potential and artistic integration of tools normally used as aids (such as audio description, sign language, etc.) and extract new perspectives from unconventional forms of physicality and perception. These are artistically driven motives that seek to bring about social inclusion. Unfortunately, there are still organizations, companies or artists who “draw inspiration from people with disabilities,” so to speak. This shows no vision, but opportunism, and its effect, unfortunately, is appropriation and exclusivity. Inclusion does not simply mean working with less privileged (groups of) people, it means equality in access. An organization or company committed to inclusion must also fully believe in its added

value. Giving access to experts at every (decision-making) level is critical. Trust can only occur when there is representation. If a governing body, management and teaching team is white and able-bodied, it will be a major barrier for disabled artists and people from migrant backgrounds to believe that their needs will be recognized and acknowledged. The same goes for the distribution of resources. An organization that chooses to be more accessible must also make relevant budgetary choices to do so. It is impossible to become more structurally inclusive without investment and without the (research) time that such transitions require.

What can we promise ourselves and others in terms of inclusion, and what can't we promise?

Integrated accessibility starts with a good understanding of one's own organization, vision and ambitions in terms of inclusion. It is very difficult to embed structural change in a short period of time. Radical choices can create progress, but can also create blind spots that damage trust and jeopardize inclusion in the long run. Groups of people who, for whatever reason, have less access to the cultural sector and performing arts education should be entitled to an environment that is inclusive because of an organization or company's experience, dedication and ongoing evaluation. This means that every stakeholder must support and promote this vision. A relationship of trust must be given time to grow and a mutual respect must develop, driven by open communication and the assurance that individual needs can be named and will be addressed. The promises you make largely determine the

expectations of the target group. This starts with practical matters such as wheelchair accessibility, (sign language) interpreters, individual guidance, clear communication, etc., and it also includes the experience and approach of the staff. This is why the word “inclusive” is sometimes too broad to fulfill the promises it implies. It is essential to articulate concretely for whom and how accessibility can be guaranteed. An organization may have extensive experience in accessibility for the blind and visually impaired, but no experience with deaf people. If an organization cannot promise accessibility in a specific area or for a specific target group, it is all the more important to identify and communicate that in advance.

Is inclusion primarily a means or an end?

Where is the core of your activities and aspirations? Do you use the social aspect of inclusion to enrich your artistic practice or do you use artistic forms to achieve a social goal? Both are equally valid and relevant and a lot of cross-pollination is possible, but they are realized in very different ways. The performing arts sector is built up from informal contacts and networks, within which different circuits are sometimes very separate from each other. This can be in terms of disciplines and regions, but also in terms of inclusion. Particularly in the UK (and in recent years throughout Europe), there has long been the Disability Arts movement, an umbrella term for organizations and artists with so-called disabilities who are working to achieve structural accessibility, ownership and professionalization of the inclusion-oriented arts. Crossover with the mainstream is not always easy to find. Although more and more (large) organizations

are thinking about how to become more accessible, I see little to none structural change in the Flemish arts field. Accessibility is often a responsibility of the communications department, while the artistic and business leadership should in fact be (expressing) the vision. There are simply too few people in the field who really believe in structural forms of accessibility. On top of that, we often get experience experts from abroad and many of them (like me) are non-disabled. This doesn't have to be problematic, but it should not get in the way of equality in exchange between the artistic and social motives and outcomes of inclusion.

What conversation do we have (before-hand) with faculty, students and guest artists?

A vision of accessibility also translates into the choice of teachers and guest artists. Their experience, expertise and artistic practice both during and after their arrival can be enriching and resonate within the structure and organization. Therefore, a conversation to align each other's visions and practices has great added value. Indeed, approaches around accessibility and their interpretation can be far apart. Moreover, in the case of performing arts education, there are major differences between the expectations of teachers, students and guest artists. A student takes a workshop within the framework of the education program, but a guest artist may have a very different motivation to participate. Starting a workshop (series) by naming the personal expectations and needs (of both organization and participants) can help in mutual understanding and creates a framework in which people feel personally involved.



the body of the (teaching) artist is present