

Working with disabled participants

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This resource aims to give some initial ideas for making dance sessions inclusive and accessible. It is provided by Magpie Dance, a contemporary dance company based in Bromley, Kent, which has carved out a national reputation for its exciting and inspiring approach to inclusive and creative dance. Founded in 1986 by Artistic Director Avril Hitman, Magpie is at the forefront of dance for learning disabled people, has performed in a wide range of prestigious venues across the country and received two national Charity Awards (2003 and 2006) for innovation.

The Magpie Dance programme comprises:

- youth, adult and open community dance sessions, weekly during term-time
- choreographic mentoring programme
- outreach projects in schools and other organisations
- professional development workshops for teachers, artists and professionals working with disabled clients

Most recently, Magpie has set up an open access Inclusive Dance Practice Training Scheme for people who want to learn about inclusive practice in greater depth through modular, hands-on training spanning an academic year. Our trainees come from a variety of artistic and educational backgrounds, and this year we have appointed our first learning disabled trainee who is a longstanding youth group member.

This resource is a summary of some of the points we ask trainees and those taking part in our professional development workshops to consider.

Paul Naderi and one of Magpie's adult dancers during a residency with Slobhan Davies Dance. Photo: David McCormick



Approach to Inclusive practice

There are different approaches to inclusive practice. Magpie's expertise is working with learning disability and a number of our dancers have physical disabilities too. Our approach is transferable into a variety of inclusive settings.

The most productive role for the teacher to take in a dance class would be as a 'facilitator'. This role would involve:

- guiding the group through tasks, listening and letting tasks be informed by participants' ideas
- not underestimating the intelligence or ability of disabled participants, finding out what they would like and are able to do
- exploring ways to include all participants rather than reasons for excluding certain groups

Communication and language

Working with dance is a powerful way to reduce the significance of verbal communication.

- Try to word questions in a way whereby a physical answer could be given, e.g. 'What moves could we do to show our idea?'
- Play games/set tasks where you ask for a physical rather than a verbal response, helping students who are less verbal feel more included.
- Use language sensitively and consider the language you use e.g. 'reaching up to the ceiling' rather than 'reach up with your hands'.
- Add makaton signs for words you use a lot – or invent your own. Use them consistently and the group will become familiar with your commands, making instructions clearer for hearing impaired participants.
- Remember to face participants when you address them.

Use tools such as movement cards/pictures/arrows. Some participants will have their own books with symbols for everyday use. Adding movement and directional symbols to this is a simple way of increasing inclusion.

Time and space

- Participants may need more time to respond to questions or tasks set. Giving this time is vital to ensuring everyone's ideas are heard.



An adult dancer being mentored by David Nurse on Magpie's choreographic mentoring programme. Photo: Phil Polglaze

- Touch is an integral part of dance. It is important that participants understand the meaning of 'appropriate touch' and respect other people's personal space. This also applies at times in the session when dance activities are not taking place.
- At Magpie, we use high-fives and handshakes to avoid hugging and other close physical contact that could be misinterpreted.

Task

- Set creative tasks rather than performing movement and expecting participants to copy. People's bodies and abilities are different and if they can be part of creating the movement themselves, it will suit their body and the way they move, empower them to think for themselves and enable them to take ownership of creative material.
- Always be prepared to adapt a task to suit an individual, e.g. by applying a movement to a different body part, simplifying it or changing the speed.
- Always have extensions and adaptations of tasks to hand and be prepared to deviate from your plans.

Equipment

- Consider using multi-sensory stimuli (stretchy fabric, stretchy bands, rubber dots, giant dice, parachutes), live music and visual aids; these encourage creative responses.

Supporting participants

- More support is often needed when working with disabled people. Some will come with support workers.
- At Magpie, we ask support workers to take part in a session if a participant needs one-to-one support. It makes for a more inclusive and creative learning environment if everyone in the room is equal and takes part fully.

- Try to challenge expectations by encouraging support workers not to make too many assumptions about the participant's capabilities.
- Some support workers may want to help their participant by physically moving them. Encourage the support worker to ask first, and for them to be patient in letting the participant respond to a task.
- Sometimes it may be an option to share responsibility for assisting a participant, e.g. by making it part of the movement for another participant to push the wheelchair or doing a reaching movement where they take another participant's hand so that both are reaching.
- Working with others should be encouraged at all times, e.g. partner work, as participants can also support each other.

Safety and access

- Access to space is key. Wheelchair users may require lifts, ramps and wider entranceways.
- Remember stairs can present a problem to non-wheelchair users too.
- If possible carry out a risk assessment to cover each individual's own physicality and needs.

Evaluation

- Consider designing an evaluation tool which fits with your organisation and students. Use this to measure meaningful outcomes and progress easily or to highlight particular problems.
- Ask the participants for feedback and their opinions throughout the class and at the end of sessions.

For more information on Magpie Dance, visit www.magpiedance.org.uk

A Magpie youth group dancer in a performance of *New Horizons*, March 2011. Photo: Phil Polglaze

