

**"Just to let them be who they are." Learning  
Disability, Arts Training and the Contact Zone**

by

James Cooper

A Thesis

Submitted to the School of Education

University of Sheffield

In fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

99,980 words -February 2024

## **Abstract**

The driving force behind this thesis is the uneasy relationship between learning disability and employment. Narrow, ableist conceptions of work and workers dominate the cultural and social landscape, directly influencing the limited opportunities offered to learning disabled people leaving formal education. The aim of this work was to locate a training place that directly challenges this trend. Working with a theatre for learning disabled people I documented its daily practices and underlying ethos, then considered the combined effect that this locale is having upon a group of learning disabled students enrolled upon one of its long term training programs. Underpinned by a constructivist ontology, the research followed an ethnographic, qualitative line of enquiry. Observations, participation and unstructured interviews were completed with informants, with the aim of documenting both the physical space of the theatre and the atmosphere in which the students, artists and staff collaborate. The evidence gathered points to an equitable, activist, cooperative, professional, well resourced training environment that is providing students and artists with a space to reassess and reimagine what their futures may become. Futures that are far removed from the constrained and limited ones currently prescribed by an ableist labour market and a conditional workfare state. The significance of this work lies in its ability to inform conversations around the type and quality of post school provision that should be readily available and accessible for all learning disabled people. It demonstrates that learning disabled people can be both independent thinkers and decision makers regarding important issues affecting their lives, such as the types of futures they want to pursue. Finally, it shows that it is entirely possible (and desirable) to curate training environments in which learning disabled students can develop and thrive.

**Keywords: Learning disability, Training, Employment, Foucault, The Contact Zone**

# **Contents**

<b>Acknowledgements</b>	<b>p9</b>
<b>A note on the text</b>	<b>p11</b>
<b>Foreword</b>	<b>p14</b>
<b>Chapter 1 - Where Are We Now?</b>	<b>p20</b>
Chapter Overview	p20
Introduction	p22
Legislation and Disability	p26
Foucault and Disability	p31
Governmentality and Disability	p33
power/knowledge and Disability	p37
Bio-politics and Disability	p41
Panopticism and Disability	p43
The myth of the work ethic	p45
Work and Disability	p49
Employability and Disability	p53
<b>Chapter 2 - Future Days</b>	<b>p57</b>
Chapter overview	p57
Introduction	p57
Foucault: Parrhēsia and Fiction	p58
The Contact Zone	p63
Activism, advocacy and resistance	p69
Organic Intellectuals and Activism	p71
Disability Activism	p74
Disability Advocacy	p76

The case for theorisation	p80
Alternative workplaces	p83
Universal Basic Income	p88
<b>Chapter3 - Designing the research</b>	<b>p97</b>
Chapter Overview	p97
Introduction	p98
Research Aims	p99
Researcher Background	p99
Research Setting and participants	p100
Initial approach and consolidation	p103
Informants/recruitment	p106
Logic of Enquiry	p110
Methods and procedures of data collection	p115
Data Management Plan	p115
Research Design	p116
Covid resilience	p116
Observations	p117
Fieldnotes	p119
Interviews	p121
Unstructured Interviews	p123
Staff Interviews	p125
Student Interviews	p126
Methods and Procedures of Data Analysis	p128
Abduction	p128
Narratives	p129
Analysis of narratives	p133

<b>Chapter 4 - Ethical considerations</b>	<b>p140</b>
Chapter overview	p140
Introduction	p140
Trustworthiness of data	p141
Defining the interview space	p143
Transcription	p147
<b>Chapter 5 - Talking about the theatre</b>	<b>p151</b>
Chapter overview	p151
Introduction	p151
Scene 1 - Warming Up	p153
The space of the theatre	p160
The Agora	p161
The Agora and The Contact Zone	p164
Inside Studio 1	p169
Thoughts on the building	p169
Working at the theatre company	p171
Descriptions of the theatre company	p173
<b>Chapter 6-Processes and Practices at the theatre</b>	<b>p177</b>
Chapter overview	p177
The importance of collaboration	p177
The Co-Facilitators	p181
Scene 2 - The Drumming Lesson	p184
Co-Facilitation and Cooperation at8 the theatre company	p188
Institutional conviction	p198
Scene 3 - The Activist Panel	p203

Conviction in Action	p207
Interaction with external agencies	p210
Pass/Fail, Achieving/Improving/Excelling and The Contact Zone	p215
Final thoughts	p218
<b>Chapter 7 - Becoming Artists</b>	<b>p220</b>
Chapter overview	p220
Introduction	p220
Artistic Impulses, New Beginnings	p223
Student's impressions of the theatre company	p230
Creative work	p236
Tink and the act of 'proving science wrong'	p240
Scene 4 - Jackson and Old Major	p243
Creative Futures	p251
Student development during training	p251
Bryan and The Contact Zone	p258
Control and Possibility	p262
Scene 5 - A Spectre's Monologue	p270
Comments on the Spectre's Monologue	p273
Final thoughts	p277
<b>Chapter 8 - Discussion</b>	<b>p278</b>
Chapter overview	p278
Introduction	p278
"All this beautiful space and all these beautiful studios." - The space of the theatre	p280

<b>"That's where the fun happens." - The atmosphere of the Agora.</b>	<b>p283</b>
<b>"Everything becomes a conversation."</b>	
<b>- Cooperation at the theatre</b>	<b>p285</b>
<b>"That's so powerful, and I don't think you know how powerful that is." - The possibility of learning disability</b>	<b>p288</b>
<b>"Well my problem is that it's bollocks!"</b>	
<b>- Activism at the theatre</b>	<b>p290</b>
<b>"My next home!" - Belonging at the theatre</b>	<b>p295</b>
<b>"Yeah, it's kind of like an endless list of opportunities right now." - Development during training</b>	<b>p296</b>
<b>"Right! I'm gonna go and be my free, be myself, be my true authentic self." - Independent thinkers, Decision makers</b>	<b>p298</b>
<b>"We've saved you a space. We'd like to ask you some questions." - Student Activists</b>	<b>p300</b>
<b>Evidence to support theoretical underpinning</b>	<b>p302</b>
<b>Foucault: Governmentality</b>	<b>p302</b>
<b>Foucault: Parrhēsia and fictioning history at the theatre</b>	<b>p304</b>
<b>The theatre and the Contact Zone</b>	<b>p307</b>
<b>Issues affecting research</b>	<b>p310</b>
<b>Covid</b>	<b>p310</b>
<b>Time constraints affecting research</b>	<b>p311</b>

Inability to involve parents and guardians	p312
Final thoughts	p312
<b>Chapter 9 - Epilogue</b>	<b>p314</b>
Chapter overview	p314
Introduction	p315
Contribution to the knowledgebase	p317
Practical contributions	p317
Theoretical contributions	p319
Recommendations arising from research	p322
Funding for disabled students - a demand	p323
Creation of more permanent spaces - a demand	p324
Drama investigating work from a learning disabled perspective - a demand	p325
The theatre as a consultancy - a demand	p326
Artists and students as consultants - a demand	p327
Final remarks	p328
<b>Bibliography</b>	<b>p335</b>
<b>Appendix 1 - Research Documents</b>	<b>p355</b>
<b>Appendix 2 - Interview logs</b>	<b>p398</b>
<b>Appendix 3 - Field note example</b>	<b>p400</b>
<b>Appendix 4 - Data Management Plan</b>	<b>p403</b>



## **Acknowledgements**

The undertaking of this work has been, without doubt, one of the most enjoyable experiences of my life. That it has been so is due entirely to those I would like to thank below.

In the first instance, I would like to thank the students, artists and staff at the theatre company. The wholehearted welcome I received, and your willingness to engage with my ideas, was simply incredible. Without you this thesis would not exist. My profound thanks for taking a jaded, world weary man and showing him just what it is possible to accomplish with imagination, conviction and dedication. There is something truly remarkable happening within the walls of your building. But you knew that already. Thank you for sharing it with me. I can only hope to pass on what I have learnt during my time with you, so that others may learn from your ethos and approach, and all learning disabled people are given the opportunity to train, develop and work in environments similar to yours.

My next thanks must go to my supervisors, Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole and Professor Dan Goodley. A tremendous double act! Thank you for your integrity, insight, wit and patience. From my first tentative email back in 2018, through to the dog days of my thesis, you have been supportive, provocative and fully engaged with my project. You created the conditions that made the entire process exciting and fun. I know how fortunate I have been to have my work critiqued and stress tested by academics of your calibre. But more than this, seeing up close your passion and restless commitment to the cause of bringing lasting change to the lives of learning disabled people has been inspirational. I only hope that I can, in some small way, follow the example you have set.

Additionally, I would like to thank the ESRC for providing the funds that made this PhD tangible. As a father and a husband and subject to the same demands placed on every family in post austerity, post Brexit, post Covid, post

Trussonomics Britain, entertaining the idea of returning to academia without your financial support would have been inconceivable. The stipend you awarded me gave me the space to breathe and commit to this work. Thank you.

And finally, I would like to thank my small, but perfectly formed, family. To B and Mils (and the 'two cats in the yard'). Your boundless love, strength, wisdom, compassion and grace fills our home to the brim, and I am a better man for it. Three is the magic number!

## **A note on the text**

People will notice that I am inconsistent with my nomenclature throughout this thesis. In it I refer interchangeably both to 'learning disabled people' and 'people with learning disabilities'. I do so because I am deeply troubled by both, and would gladly use neither, but for the current absence of workable alternatives. In line with the self advocacy movement, I believe deeply in the principles of 'people first' alongside the sentiment of 'nothing about us without us' (Charlton 2000), and so am troubled by the continued usage of both terms.

When using either I am reminded of the discussions around 'disclosure' and 'passing' as developed by Goffman in *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity* (1990). Stigma, Goffman argues, is to be understood as 'an attribute that is deeply discrediting' (1990 p3). In our species-typical, ableist society 'learning disability' is one such attribute, and so I am hesitant to employ it: particularly as I am not sure what the term even means. Indeed, it seems such an inadequate, almost meaningless phrase, wholly unable to contain the sheer variety, complexity, difference and vibrancy of human experience that it purports to name (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2016).

The term 'learning disabled person' troubles me because it seems to be an instance of enforced disclosure that is used (most often by experts) to describe the individual upfront, without consulting the individual in question as to whether or not they would consider themselves as being 'learning disabled'. Alternatively, however, the phrase 'person with learning disabilities' (again frequently employed by experts) also jars because it feels to me like an exercise in enforced passing. A suggestion of the 'normal' person to which is attached, via the preposition 'with', the 'learning disability'. The normal burdened and spoiled with the adjunct abnormal. An individual that could be considered 'normal' were it not for the marker of 'learning disability'.

Such conversations of language conventions may seem abstracted from the problem at hand, until one considers the real peril that the application of 'learning disability', (either as a qualifier - person with learning disabilities or defining trait - learning disabled person) to an individual can entail. They are phrases that, when invoked, can have profound effects and implications for those to whom they are applied. Acts of domination, prejudice, impoverishment, neglect, ridicule, surveillance, ostracisation and more have all been justified by invoking both phrases, and so I feel queasy each time I approach either. Moreover, prior to my return to academia, I spent many years supporting learning disabled adults and students and rarely heard individuals refer to themselves using these phrases, something that is supported in the literature (Cluley 2022). Occasionally the students and adults I worked alongside would self identify and refer to themselves in relation to the diagnosis they had been given (indeed one such moment, when James talks of his pathological demand avoidance syndrome in Chapter 7), but rarely would people lead, or explain actions, emotions etc. with reference to 'learning disability'.

And so I have always tried to stay away from using either. Before returning to academia my proximity to the people I was supporting and working alongside made this easy, but as a disability studies scholar writing about a particular group of students, I am forced to employ both, whilst believing profoundly that neither are fit for purpose.

Better minds than mine will hopefully come to solve this problem. However, this thesis is not the place to unpack such semantic issues, important though they are. As an aside, I myself have been turning around the idea of whether the current fashionable phrase 'neuro-divergent' and neurodiversity (Singer 2017, Stenning & Rosqvist 2021) could be co-opted, and whether to do so would be appropriate/attractive, especially in light of the good work done by disability activists and the critical disability studies movement to remake/remodel and

reclaim the phrase 'learning disability'. My thinking, though, is that because so many people in popular culture seem to want to claim the phrase 'neurodivergent' as a marker of identity, it may hold positive connotations that are currently closed off to 'learning disability'. Additionally, the phrase 'neurodivergent' retains an opaqueness that may be useful: the 'divergence' is not qualified in the way that 'disability' is explicitly qualified by the adjective 'learning'. This may afford individuals the space to define personally what 'divergence' means/does/looks like for them.

But these are thoughts for another day. I simply wanted to raise my disquiet with the two dominant phrases used to describe the people I have supported and worked alongside for the past years. In lieu of a workable solution, therefore, I use both phrases interchangeably and extend my apologies to readers for not having a more suitable, enlightened phrase to employ.

## Foreword

“To begin at the beginning.”

Dylan Thomas: *Under Milk Wood*

At the start, a few words for all readers. I offer an invitation to read this thesis in whatever order people feel most inclined to do so. This work will be submitted for examination at the University of Sheffield. As the content page that precedes these words show, there is a lot of ground that I must cover to satisfy my examiners that I have achieved the necessary standard. But I am also aware that not everybody will be interested in all parts of the work. With this in mind, I intend to use the rest of this forward to outline what people may expect from each chapter, so that they may use this information to make a decision as to whether to read it or not.

Whilst writing this thesis I have imagined two distinct audiences who may wish to engage with this text. As to my first audience, my examiners, supervisors and other members of the disability studies academic community, I suspect they will be keen (or in the case of my examiners, duty bound!) to engage with the whole of the work. I will leave them to read on, but I would like to stay with my second audience (i.e. students, artists, staff, parents, guardians etc.), or indeed any reader who, for a multitude of their own reasons, may want to read only parts of this work. For this audience, I provide a brief overview of what each section contains.

### **Chapter 1 - Where Are We Now?**

This chapter will be of interest for anyone who wants to read about the ideas, writers and theories I have called on to help me understand and describe the events, actions and conversations I witnessed during my time onsite. It serves as an introduction to the big picture behind the work; namely, the ongoing

problem faced by young adults with learning disabilities in accessing meaningful training and employment opportunities after leaving formal education.

## **Chapter 2 - Future Days**

This chapter will also be of interest to readers who would like to know about the theories and ideas that I have used to inform my work. However, where the previous chapter focused on identifying and understanding the problems faced by learning disabled people as they attempt to interact with the world of work and welfare systems, this chapter has a more critical tone. Specifically, it will look at ideas and theories that help us to contest the current situation and develop ways in which we can imagine and construct more equitable futures for people with learning disabilities.

## **Chapter 3 - Research Design**

In this chapter I go into some detail about the decisions I made when designing, executing and writing up the research. It is the instruction manual to the thesis and describes how the research was constructed and why it takes the particular approach it does. It is the place where I set out the goals for my research (including the two research questions at the heart of this work) alongside a roadmap for the reader as to how I attempted to answer them.

## **Chapter 4 - Ethical Considerations**

In this chapter I reflect on issues that arose when considering how to best conduct the research. I look at issues such as how I sought to conduct and transcribe interviews and reflect upon how the decisions I made directly affected the research process.

## **Chapter 5 - Talking About the Theatre**

This chapter will be of interest to readers who would like to read extended descriptions of the space of the theatre. In it I focus on two particular spaces: The

meeting place for students, staff and artists, that I call the Agora (name anonymised) and Studio 1, which is one of three multifunctional studio spaces where the daily activities of the theatre take place. The chapter ends by sharing the thoughts of staff on how they view the building and the theatre company.

### **Chapter 6 - Processes and Practices of the theatre**

This chapter will be of interest to readers who would like to know more about how the theatre company works. It looks at the practices and processes that underpin daily activities and relies heavily on the words of the theatre staff to describe both the environment and atmosphere of the theatre company in an attempt to share with the reader a sense of the work that goes on within the building.

### **Chapter 7 - Becoming Artists**

This chapter will be of interest to readers who would like to know how the learning disabled artists and students who attend the theatre talk about their experience. Like the previous chapter, it is heavily reliant on the words of those generous enough to give their time to talk to me about the training, development and work they are engaged with at the theatre.

### **Chapter 8 - Discussion**

This chapter may be of use to readers who are short of time, or who simply do not wish to engage with the thesis for an extended period. In it I bring together the ideas raised in the previous two chapters and, with reference to the ideas raised in Chapter 1, summarise what I believe are the key findings of my research. I look back to the ideas and theories I introduced in earlier chapters and see if they help to explain what I saw and heard at the theatre, or are applicable to the information that came from my observations and conversations with the people at the theatre company. I also take time to reflect on my research and consider how it may have been improved.



## **Chapter 9 - Epilogue**

This chapter will be of interest to readers who wish to know my final thoughts on the project as a whole. I will use this chapter to look back on the work as a whole and reflect on whether I achieved the goals set out in Chapter 3. I will also consider the impact I believe my work has within my field of interest, and make recommendations that come directly from my experiences at the theatre, with the aim of informing future discussions around how we may develop and provide more equitable training, development and work opportunities for young adults with learning disabilities.

## **Chapter 10 - Bibliography**

This chapter will be of interest to readers who wish to read the original texts that are quoted throughout this thesis. It is an alphabetical list of all the authors, writers and theorists I have drawn on when trying to think through the events and activities of the research.

**Chapter 11 - Appendix** The final chapter of this work presents all the documentation that I created in order to conduct the research, and will be of interest to readers who wish to know more of the practicalities of the research.

## **Overview of thesis**

I returned to academia after many years supporting first adults, then students, with learning disabilities. Their mistreatment by society in general, and a succession of right wing flavoured administrations in particular, both angered and politicised me. In short I became increasingly concerned about the futures of school leavers with learning disabilities, because it seemed to me that demand side friendly policies (such as the discriminatory and indefensible 'reasonable adjustments' clause inserted into Section 20 of the 2010 Equalities Act) were being invoked to lock learning disabled people out of the workplace at the very same

moment that they were being harassed and sanctioned by the conditional workfare state for a misperceived worklessness. During my eight years as a Teaching Assistant, I supported numerous students on extended work experience placements. I saw first hand how talented and dedicated learning disabled workers with learning disabilities were routinely overlooked when the issue of paid employment came to the table and I resolved to address the issue.

In order to do so I sought in my PhD thesis to locate an instance of good practice. A place infused with equitable principles and progressive understandings of the necessity and desirability of including learning disabled people in the workplace. A space where the petty strictures and restrictive constraints that define so many places of work were either hacked, crippled or outright rejected.

My search led me, in early November 2021 to the outskirts of a northern town. There, hidden inside the skeleton of an old mill (arguably *the* ultimate symbol of the exploitative and precarious nature of capitalist production), I encountered the beautifully reclaimed, superbly appointed, professional space of a leading theatre for people with learning disabilities (for fuller descriptions of the theatre please see chapters 5,6 & 7). My initial engagement with both the space and the people who populate it brought the swift realisation that something truly remarkable was happening within the building. Something that I was keen to understand more about and document.

This impulse led directly to the two research aims that became the focus of this work:

**RA1: To document and describe the processes and practices of a particular training provision for young adults with learning disabilities.**

**RA2: To document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term training program.**

I shall spend the rest of this work expanding on how I went about this task.

## Chapter 1 - Where Are We Now?

“Factory’s no place for me, Boss man leave me be.”

Captain Beefheart - *Plastic Factory*

### Chapter Overview

The aim of this chapter, and the one that follows, is to introduce readers to the ideas that I have found helpful when thinking about the topic of learning disability and employment in general, and of my time onsite at the theatre company in particular. They will be of interest to readers who would like to know more about the various theories I have used to build the argument at the heart of my work: that of the need to provide more meaningful training, development and employment opportunities for young adults with learning disabilities.

This chapter will consistently make reference to academics and theorists working in the disciplines of Philosophy (especially poststructuralism), Critical Theory, Social Policy and Disability Studies and apply what they have written to my work. As someone who has always enjoyed thinking through abstract ideas, I find this task enjoyable, but I am keenly aware that, for many, this is not the case. By engaging with various concepts and ideas the Literature Review becomes, unavoidably at times, quite dense. I am aware that many people are uninspired by such abstraction. To these readers I apologise: academic tradition demands that I demonstrate an awareness of the thinkers who have come before me, and readers such as my examiners need to be reassured that my argument is not built upon shifting sands, but rather deep foundations. I suggest that readers not interested in such discussions might be inclined to turn instead to the later sections of the thesis for more concrete descriptions of the theatre and the activities that take place there.

For those readers with an interest in theory, this chapter is organised as follows. Firstly, I attempt to locate learning disability in relation to the modern

workplace and the conditional workfare state (Wacquant 2009). Relying heavily on the work of Foucault (1977, 1980, 2007, 2008, 2020, I argue that learning disability is currently enmeshed in a 'nexus of governmentality' (Lemke 2019). This attempts to fix and describe learning disability, in order that it can be administered to, whilst simultaneously operating technologies of surveillance and discipline in order to correct or punish any perceived transgressions. In the following chapter I look at how this current state of affairs may be troubled and challenged by engaging with writers who help to answer Titchkosky's question of 'what would it mean to think disability out from the bureaucratic order it is bounded by today?' (2020, p207). By considering parrhēsia, (Foucault 2010, 2011), the Contact Zone (Pratt 1991,1997,2007), activist perspectives, 'alternative workplaces' (Hall and Wilton 2015), anti-work theory (Weeks 2011) and UBI+ (Standing 2017), the chapter begins to imagine how spaces of training, development and employment for people with learning disability may begin to be conceived that are meaningful to those engaged upon them.

Before I continue, I must state that, from my vantage point, informed both by my direct experience and academic reflection, the manner in which training, development and employment opportunities are currently constituted for young adults with learning disabilities is limited, discriminatory and meagre. Because of this, I believe strongly that young adults with learning disabilities have a right to refuse work if it is ill suited or poorly matched to their interests and abilities. However, this is tempered by the fact that I have absolutely no evidence that this is what they themselves want. Indeed, it has long been apparent to me that there is an undoubted, and possibly unresolvable tension when thinking of how and if people with learning disabilities should be brought closer, or kept away from the job market.

My stance then, as I begin this chapter can be summed up by quoting the title of Grover and Piggot's comprehensive collection (2015): "*Disabled people,*

*work and welfare: Is employment really the answer?"* I begin this literature review hoping to discover whether it may be possible to challenge the current conception of meaningful work which valorises paid work above all other forms (i.e. the *Improving Lives* Green paper 2016 or the *Transforming Support* White paper 2023 both published by the DWP and referred to later in this chapter) and instead look for examples of employment that are not reliant upon competitive self interest and profit. Work instead reimagined as acts of self care and self definition. Work as acts of mutuality and collaboration that are non-transactional and non-contractual. Work for no other end other than the joy of the work itself. A work willingly undertaken and imbued with personal meaning by the person undertaking to do it. Not work as profit or exploitation for another's gain.

Mark Fisher's playlist, *No More Miserable Monday mornings* (K.Punk blog Sat July 18th, 2015, online) moves from Sleaford Mods *Jobseeker* and The Specials *Rat Race*, through Ann Peebles *I'm Gonna Tear Your Playhouse Down* and fades to *At Last I Am Free* by Chic. In his own description it moves 'from anger and sadness to collective joy... from work that never ends to endless free time.' From the dread of the drudgery of yet another bloody week at work, to the delicious possibilities of another kind of existence. People may dismiss such sentiment as whimsy, utopian even. But it seems to me that if free marketeers, neo-liberals and late market capitalists have been granted the time and space over the past two centuries to create their own utopias, we progressive thinkers must reclaim the right to begin to dig escape tunnels and imagine our own.

## **Introduction**

Since the advent of the industrial revolution, disabled people have been locked into a problematic relationship with work and the workplace. As Stiker (2000) and Borsay (2004) highlight, in pre-industrial times, productive work was often completed within the home. The disabled worker - understood as any individual who, for whatever reason, is incapable of matching the demands of the

workplace as imagined, defined and constructed by the dominant faction of any historical age - was thus surrounded by a family/community responsive to their needs. Tasks could be allocated accordingly, and disabled people could be accommodated into the process of work.

This changed during the process of industrialisation that began at the start of the nineteenth century. The factories into which the working classes were chased did not require individuals to staff them, rather automatons. Repetitive tasks, often demanding physical stamina characterised the work, and these could be achieved (at a price) by able-bodied individuals. 'Docile bodies' (Foucault 1977) and minds that could be cajoled, or forced into generating maximum profit for industrialists and factory owners. Disabled workers struggled to comply with the arbitrary rules imposed by a system motivated solely by profit (Stiker 2000, Borsay 2004). Thus began a problematic relationship between work and disability that continues to this day.

This relationship can be understood as a pincer movement that locks disabled people out of the workplace at the very same moment that it demonises them for their worklessness. For instance, legislation is enacted that supports the continued exclusion of disabled people from the workplace. A strong example of this would be the clause inserted into the 2010 Equality Act that states that employers need 'only make adjustments that are reasonable' (Government Equalities Office 2010 p2) to their workplaces to accommodate disability. On the face of it, this requirement seems sensible and, well, reasonable. But Foucault (1980) reminds us that knowledge follows power to the same extent that power simultaneously follows knowledge. The two are inexorably linked. What is presented as an instance of reasonable knowledge (such as the levels of necessary adjustments needed to accommodate disability into the workplace) is often an expression of power (in this case governmental policy being conjured and crafted to keep business and money satisfied that they can proceed with the important business of serving capital). Additionally, Barthes' maxim, 'underneath the rule

discover the abuse' (2010, p108) rings true here. What seems evident in the government pronouncement is that employers, the very group that have locked people with learning disabilities out of the workplace, are still the final arbiter of who gets to access the workplace. Finally, Slater (2017) exposes at great depth how words such as 'reasonable' can be politicised and weaponised to dominate a marginalised population. Given that the industrialised workplace has never sought to reasonably accommodate disabled workers, demand side friendly policies will do little to redress the balance because, by continuing to protect business, they reinforce to employers that they are doing enough to accommodate difference into the workplace, and that the actions of industry are fair and 'reasonable'.

Concurrent with this policy failure is the ongoing retooling of the welfare state, a process instigated by the Blair administration in the late 1990s (Grover and Piggott 2015), and which continues to this day. The aim appears to be to transform welfare from a rights based system into an increasingly conditional, activation based model that demands compliance under the threat of benefit sanctions (Mehta et al 2021, Heap 2015, Patrick and Fenney 2015); a change that has led commentators such as Wacquant to redefine welfare as 'workfare' (2009 p43). Workfare defines better, I believe, the conditionality and the increasingly contractually informed conception of welfare as administered in Britain today, and it also flags the centrality of the perceived importance of work, in whatever configuration, for successive administrations regarding the lives citizens should be encouraged to lead.

The aim of this research, then, was to gather the perspectives of young adults with learning disabilities who are currently having to navigate an uncertain, post-crash, post austerity, post-Brexit, post-Covid job market (Beyer 2020) at the same time as they are negotiating with the workfare state. From the outside, it appeared to me that work and the workplace as currently constituted are unsuited to the needs of disabled people, but I was keen to gather testimonies



from members of this group in order to better understand whether this is the case.

My initial engagement with the literature suggested to me that, at the very least, work must be reconstituted to fit the disabled worker (Hall and Wilton 2015), rather than the current model which expects the disabled worker to fit the work/workplace. Furthermore, given the dearth of opportunities, and the continued reluctance of employers to employ people with learning disabilities, my reading suggested that maybe we should begin to think of ways in which young adults with learning disabilities can begin protected from the vicissitudes of the workplace and given the means by which to interact with the world of work (and society at large) upon their own terms (Grover and Piggott 2015).

From my personal experience supporting SEND students on work placements, I knew that some students were keen to find jobs, whereas others either passively, or actively baulked at the idea of finding work. Research that seeks to garner the opinions of people with learning disabilities about their experience of work (e.g. Mehta et al 2021, Callus 2017, Woodin 2015, Amin 2009) does seem to show that people with learning disabilities perceived benefits from being employed, but that often these benefits are explained in terms of forging friendship, combating isolation, and giving structure to days, (Rustad & Kassah 2020, Callus, 2017, Cramm et al 2009) rather than a desire to become embroiled in the professional realm.

Given the centrality placed on the importance of paid work as a marker of worth in modern society, agitating for policies that would only serve to further distance disabled people from this marker may in reality become problematic and serve only to further isolate and differentiate this group from the general population. What follows, then, is an engagement with the literature that has informed my thinking as I try to understand the position of young adults with learning disabilities in relation to the world of work. I will aim to ground the abstraction by repeatedly returning to concrete examples taken from government

policy that I believe illustrate the problematic and unresolved intersection of learning disability and work.

## **Legislation and Disability**

In a jointly authored piece for the ministerial forward to the 2016 publication, *Improving Lives: The Work, Health and Disability Green Paper*, the ministers for work and pensions and health articulate sentiments that succinctly illustrate the position of the state regarding work and disability. Stating a commitment to ‘halving the disability employment gap’ (p.3, 2016) they argue that:

“This government is determined to build a country that works for everyone. A disability or health condition should not dictate the path a person is able to take in life - or in the workplace. What should count is a person's talents and their determination and aspiration to succeed.” (2016 p3)

Seven years later, and with disability employment figures still at the same levels as in 2016 (53.7% compared to 82.7% of the general population - House of Commons Library, Monday 19th June 2023), the executive summary to the recently published document, *Transforming Support: The Health and Disability White Paper* (DWP 16th March, 2023) states:

"Our vision in this White Paper is to help more disabled people and people with health conditions to start, stay and succeed in work."

There is no recognition within either statement of the continued marginalisation and impoverishment of the disabled community that arose directly from policies designed and legislated for by the very same administration. And no recognition in the second white paper of the failure to enact the stated aim from 2016. Instead we see an unshakeable belief in the notion of a meritocratic Britain that ‘works for everyone’ dovetailed alongside a veiled threat. By invoking

the ableist language of the market ('talents', 'determination', 'aspiration', 'succeed') the ministers re-iterate the desire to disseminate a message that the responsibility for success and failure in the British job market lies within the individual. Rather than acknowledging the consequences on the life choices arising from systematic and chronic under-investment in Health, Education or Social Welfare systems, we see again an insinuation that those who do not possess the requisite quantities of 'determination' and 'aspiration' are the architects of their own downfall. The devastating effects of the ideologically instigated project of austerity dreamt up by chancellor Osborne in the budget speech of 2010, and adhered to so assiduously by his successors Hammond, Javid, Sunak, Kwarteng and Hunt (multi-millionaires to a man), are glossed over, leaving no doubt that to be poor and workless can only reveal a fatal character flaw of the individual (Garthwaite 2011).

Set against the boosterism of the green paper that wants to 'build a country that works for everyone', and the 'vision' of the white paper to 'help more disabled people... start, stay and succeed in work', are the findings contained within two recently published parliamentary documents. The first, *Disabled People in Employment* (House of Commons Library, Jan 2023), reports stark statistics regarding employment and unemployment rates for disabled and non-disabled people. Three of these are worth quoting in full:

"The disability employment rate was 52.6% in July to September 2022, compared to 82.5% for non-disabled people."

"The disability unemployment rate was 7.2% in July to September 2022, compared to 3.2% for non-disabled people."

"The disability employment gap was 29.8 percentage points in July to September 2022. This is an increase of 1.7 percentage points on

the year and an overall decrease of 4.4 percentage points since the same quarter in 2013."

(DWP online 26th Jan 2023)

It is reasonable to argue that if this administration were really committed to altering the material conditions of disabled people's lives, we would see a reflection of this in the statistics. This is further illustrated by the figures produced by the British Association of Supported Employment (BASE) that report that only 5.6% of adults with a learning disability known to their local authority are in employment (BASE online 10th Dec 2020). That such a disparity exists after more than a decade in power points at a government either unwilling or unable to deliver on its promises.

Coupled with this, the report published in February 2021 by the All Parliamentary Group on Health in All Policies - *Five Years on: The Health Effects of the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act on Children and Disabled People*, adds to a sense of a government that is either incompetent or unwilling to set in motion tangible policy reform that would allow it to achieve its stated aims. Within this report is a summary of the working status and earning power of people with disabilities. It states:

"In 2017/18 the weekly household income for disabled people was nearly £200 p/w less than for those who were not disabled."

"The average additional costs disabled people face by virtue of their disability is £583 a month."

"Worklessness is particularly high for those who have a mental disability, with nearly 2.1 million people with a mental disability not in work (63%). Disabled people work fewer hours. Of those who are working, 32% work part-time, compared with 20% of the non-disabled population. This gap has persisted over the previous six years. On average, they work 13 fewer hours a week." (2021 p31-2)

The weekly disparity in earnings, combined with the incurred extra costs of being unfortunate enough to be classed disabled in an ableist society produces an average financial deficit of £1,383 per month or £16,596 per annum. Due to the hidden costs of disability (Clifford 2020) this financial disparity is likely to be even greater. Either way, the figures undermine the stated aims to produce a 'healthier working nation' (2016, p3), and call into question the government's belief that 'the right type of work is good for our physical and mental health' (2016, p3). This is because there seems to be little evidence that the right type of work exists. Indeed the converse seems to be true, with disabled people seemingly being more likely to have access only to poorly paid, precarious work than their able bodied peers (Carpenter 2018). As Richardson and Bensted (2017 p7) point out, the government:

“want everyone to enjoy ‘the good health that being in work can bring’, but they do not discuss how it is that work brings health and, therefore, also do not discuss how work can harm health and how worklessness can benefit health.”)

That they feel no need to do so is incredibly telling. It reveals just how complicit this administration is with the strictures of late market capitalism. In fact there is growing evidence (Ryan 2019, Cohen 2018, Srnicek and Williams 2016) that, rather than being a panacea, 'poor quality jobs are actually worse for your health than unemployment, with a shift to jobs that are high-stress and low-pay [being] routinely damaging to workers bodies and minds' (Ryan 2019, p60). Ryan highlights the double bind that currently faces disabled people (2019 p40:

“On the one hand, we are pitiable and infirm, incapable of holding positions of influence or of making a capitalist contribution. On the other, we are lazy and wilful scroungers, leaching off the hard-working non-disabled public.”

Although the ministers argue that a disability 'should not dictate the path a person is able to take' (2016 p3), being disabled seems to strictly regulate the opportunities available to an individual. Disabled people are still being locked out

of the job market, and then held accountable for their inability to find work. I suggest that this discriminatory, unworkable dyad is maintained, yet wilfully overlooked, both by the demand side of the labour market who predominantly believe that disabled people are 'incapable of holding positions', and the state institutions that seem to presume guilt ('lazy and wilful') and harass disabled people from the moment they enter the workfare state.

It is one of the aims of this thesis to dig away at this inconsistency and to highlight the injustices that are allowed to persist in our job markets and workfare systems. I hope to explore the effects these inconsistencies have upon disabled people in general and those with learning disabilities in particular. It is clear that the current confines of the capitalist system with its valorisation of paid work will do nothing to bring equity to the lives of people with learning disabilities. As Rancière (2014 p96) so incisively observes:

“The collective intelligence produced by a system of domination is only ever the intelligence of that system. Unequal society does not carry an equal society in its womb.”

We should not expect Capitalism to suddenly care about those that it has marginalised and dispossessed. To do so would be naive. Instead I believe that it is vital that we attempt to understand the processes at work within the current bureaucratic system of administration. Better understanding will allow us to describe how the current system perpetuates the oppression of individuals with learning disabilities by enacting policies that on the surface appear 'reasonable' but are in reality nothing short of barbaric. Highlighting these contradictions is an essential task as it will allow us to begin to plan a way through the current morass and move ahead to a more equitable future.

## Foucault and Disability

Given that the intersection of learning disability, employment and the workfare state lie at the heart of this research, I believe that it is possible to see my project as a study of governmentality as conceived and described in the work of Foucault. I will use this tool, alongside biopolitics, power/knowledge and panopticism (Foucault 1977, 1980, 1993, 2001, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2020) as a 'box of tools' (Allen 1997) to develop my understanding of how, in successive post-Thatcher governments, various regulatory apparatus (or *dispositifs*) have been applied to the lives of learning disabled people in order to define and produce a particular category of a disabled worker. In Britain, for instance, the *dispositif* of the Work Capability Assessment (WCA), a tool of surveillance regularly employed by the UK government, and blithely described by the state as an 'assessment to decide how much your illness or disability limits your capability to work' (UK Gov online 2023), tellingly makes no reference to who exactly gets to make this decision (spoiler alert - it is not the individual with the disability).

In this sense the WCA becomes a concrete example of Peruzzo's contention that 'policies tend to form the objects of which they speak' (2020, p4). The WCA produces a disabled person who is either judged to be capable of work or not. The former are designated as members of the 'Limited Capacity for Work Related Activity' Support Group' (a designation which exposes the individual to the full glare of the conditional workfare state), whilst the latter are defined as members of the 'Support Group' (and become embroiled in a Sisyphean task of regular reassessment in order to prove that their limited capacity to work remains). Whilst presented by central government as being a rigorous tool for assisting disabled people, it is easy to understand the WCA is an exemplar of an apparatus that has been used to administer to and domineer over people with learning disabilities (Ryan 2019, Clifford 2020) whilst gathering 'a whole complex of knowledges' (Peruzzo 2020 p4) about individuals and groups.

At the time of writing (Autumn 2023), however, the continued existence of this dispositif is clouded with uncertainty. Within the spring budget of 2023, the Sunak administration trailed its intentions to scrap the WCA. That such a tool that has brought undoubted misery and uncertainty (Clifford 2020, Disability Rights UK 2022 online) into the lives of so many disabled people is to be removed is a cause for celebration. But this joy must be tempered by the fact that what is slated to replace it is unknown. Indeed, calls for the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) to share internal documents and reports that detail the impact of its fitness to work test, and the dispositif set to replace it have been withheld. Reporting upon a denied freedom of information request the Disability News Service (DNS online April 2023) quote the DWP reply:

"We recognise that the release of information requested could provide greater understanding of the planned removal of the Work Capability Assessment... However, we have to balance this against the fact that the policy proposing the removal of the WCA is still in development."

Whilst it is gracious of the DWP to acknowledge that the 'information' they withhold could 'provide greater understanding' and alleviate concern, it is entirely in keeping with their *modus operandi* that they choose not to do so. They must be reminded that they work for us, and for the good of our nation, not the other way around. Their silence can only be read as either a stunning disregard for disabled people, or an explicit admission of yet another Conservative administration that puts soundbites ahead of tangible policy. In short, there is a promise to scrap the WCA by the DWP, 'but without releasing the details it possesses that show how such a move would affect disabled people and other groups protected from discrimination under the equality act.' (DNS online April 2023). In such instances we see explicitly how the project of governmentality is undertaken so that the general population may be analysed, quantified and directed in particular ways



that serve to maintain the status quo and best service an increasingly political economy. A task that is undertaken without feeling the need to explain the processes and decisions of this governmental process to the very groups and individuals it will impact.

In the final instance, Foucault is of real use to my work because at the heart of much of his thinking is an attempt to worry away at the given and the natural. His writing provides a starting point from which I can begin to explode the certitudes that underpin attitudes towards the disabled worker, revealing them to be nothing more than manifestations of the belief systems of the dominant fraction.

## **Governmentality and Disability**

Foucault identifies the moment when conceptions of government changed as being concurrent with the increased industrialisation of western societies (Foucault 2007, 2008, 2020). Before this time, government was inexorably linked with maintaining the sovereignty of the sovereign. This produced instruction manuals such as *The Prince* by Machiavelli (2003), that sought only to instruct would be autocrats on how to hold dominion over their territory. However, with the onset of industrialisation, and the increasing allure of capital, the question of population and its management became worthy of theorisation. This was because capital required an endless supply of healthy 'docile bodies' (Foucault 1977 p135) to populate the array of industrial workplaces that proliferated.

Governmentality is the term employed by Foucault to understand the art of government that begins to manifest itself in the nascent economies of early industrialism (Foucault 2007, 2008, 2020). Foucault (2007 p108) defines it as:

“The ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this

very specific, albeit very complex, power that has population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge and apparatus of security as its essential technical instrument.”

It is an ‘art of government’ (Foucault 2007) which slowly evolved into the hegemonic structures that dominate the landscapes of countries such as modern Britain. At its heart is a description of continuous government intervention that seeks to regulate ‘the conduct of conduct’ (Dean 2010, p17) and maintain a ‘power over life’ through ‘a biopolitics of the population’ (Foucault 1978, p139). Foucault suggests this is facilitated through a decisive shift in statecraft from a mechanism aimed at (re)asserting sovereign power towards ‘a government that finds its ends in the ‘things’ to be directed.’ (Foucault 2007, p87). In order to achieve this end an array governmental techniques and technologies must establish a disciplinary framework into which individual cases can be placed. A framework which allows hypotheses such as Biopower, power/knowledge and panopticism to become truly operational. A process that results (Foucault 2000 p219-220):

"on the one hand, in the formation of a whole series of specific governmental apparatuses, and, on the other, in the development of a whole complex of knowledges."

Foucault's perceptive analysis clearly applies to the lives of young adults with learning disabilities who are amongst the most highly codified and surveilled members of British society. As Tomlinson (2017 p165) notes:

"Much literature has been generated mainly from psychological, medical, administrative and technical perspectives, joined more recently by the neurosciences, socio-biologists, epigeneticists and others, to explain deficiencies in children and young people in their ability to learn, and argue over categories, placements and programmes."

As young adults with learning disabilities begin to transition out of an education system that seeks to understand and position them by comparison of their deficit in relation to their able bodied/minded peers, the stakes of this process become higher. This is because, for the young adult with learning disabilities, underlying many acts of observation lies the question: can this person be made to be (economically) productive at any point in the future? Repeated incursions into the lives of people with learning disabilities are undertaken to discern this (Carpenter 2018, Ryan 2019, Clifford 2020). In recent times, the accepted way to answer the question of productivity has been to expose the individual to the technology of the Work Capacity Assessment (WCA). This tool has been trusted to discover the ability of the individual to engage with paid work. If the answer is yes, the machinery of the conditional workfare system is imposed to demand that the individual engages with the field of work on terms exclusively defined by the state. Failure to do so activates the favoured disciplinary technology of successive administrations, the sanction, that has become an increasing (and pernicious) part of the lives of the learning disabled people and their allies (Ryan 2019).

The welfare state as imagined in the aftermath of the Second World War was a rights based system that existed to ensure that citizens could live (and thrive) with dignity and security. Our current workfare state is highly conditional and contractual (Grover and Piggott 2015). The testimonies gathered (e.g Centre For Welfare Reform 2013, Stewart 2018) about the experiences of disabled people forced to undertake the Work Capacity Assessment describe a byzantine and partisan process that frequently produce opaque and perverse judgements that cause meagre benefits to be cut still further or removed entirely. So prevalent are these penalties in fact that 'since 2010, disabled people have been hit with more than one million sanctions.' (Ryan 2019, p43). This however, is rarely reported in the right wing friendly, ideological state apparatus that refers to itself as the British Press. Here, shamefully, arguments are still regurgitated to an almost

absurdist degree around 'skivers versus strivers' (Valentine and Harris 2014) and instances of benefit fraud are presented (entirely falsely) as the norm.

To give a greater sense of the injustice, quoting from a self published report from Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) 'as of 30th June, 2023 HMRC currently has 9 live CCO (Corporate Criminal Offences) [into tax evasion]. No charging decisions have yet been made.' (HMRC 2023) The chutzpah of this administration's selective interest in harrying one section of society (young adults with learning disabilities) at the very moment it turns away from another (business) is breathtaking in its audacity. It can be only viewed as further evidence of a government actively choosing which sections of society to place under the microscope. Given that this administration is fixated on solving the productivity crisis it believes lies at the root of current economic problems, might it not be germane to instruct them to take a look at their own Tax Department? Either way, in such a climate understanding the mechanisms of governmentality becomes vital in order to understand and critique the interplay between young adults with learning disabilities and the state apparatus that continue to monitor and dominate their lives.

Dean (2010) has written extensively on governmentality, identifying it as the framework that supports the technologies and *dispositifs* that combine to administer the subjects within its jurisdiction. He is clear that governmentality as experienced in societies such as modern Britain (2010 p20):

“Concerns not only practices of government but also practices of the self. To analyse government is to analyse those practices that try to shape, sculpt, mobilise and work through the choices, desires, aspirations, needs, wants and lifestyles of individuals and groups.”

The position of the dominant group is interpellated into the consciousnesses of marginalised groups (such as young adults with learning disabilities) through 'linkages between questions of government, authority and politics and questions of identity, self and person.' (Dean 2010, p5). In short, an ethical regime of the self is instigated. For instance, in Britain the mode of being labelled 'worker' with its associated positive qualities is eminently preferable to the label of 'unemployed' that is routinely demonised throughout all sections of the establishment.

Due to its position as the *sine qua non* marker of worth in a capitalist society, paid work, no matter how precarious, ill suited or poorly remunerated becomes something to strive towards. This is due to the fact that, in capitalist societies, 'belonging isn't an a priori but something that must be purchased by participation in the everyday economy.' (Berlant 2011, p171). The link between work and citizenship is thus rendered explicit. Failure to participate fully in this schemata risks undermining one's status from citizen to denizen, with the attendant opprobrium that entails.

The creation of the subject, which can then be subjected to technologies of surveillance, administration, censure and correction is dependent in the first instance on the delineation of a norm (of behaviour, standards, being etc). Indeed it is essential for this norm to be described as this can then be set as the benchmark against which each individual case can be measured. Foucault argues that this process is instigated and maintained by power/knowledge and biopolitics.

### **power/knowledge and Disability**

By conjoining the terms power and knowledge (1977 1980), Foucault takes direct aim at enlightenment claims of scientific reason and objectivity. He is at pains to stress how, rather than being distinct from each other, knowledge and

power form such a tight, symbiotic relationship that they can be perceived as a circularity. As Allen (2015) explains:

“Each of these terms grows with and through the other one: they confirm each other, reproduce each other and sustain each other’s authority.” (2015, p95)

Power determines authorised trains of thought (such as ‘work is good for health’) that are then implicated in the production of sanctioned knowledge and truths (i.e the desire to ‘make work pay’). These truths are then reported back to power which uses the conclusions as further justification of the policies it enacts. power/knowledge can be employed to understand further how the self evident truths promulgated by the dominant factions within any given society are only the truths of that dominant faction (Foucault 1980 p131):

“Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics of truth: that is, the type of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what is true.’

Foucault dismisses notions of truth existing ‘out there’ as Platonic ideals and asks us to acknowledge that truth is constructed by a plethora of regimes in cahoots with the belief systems of the dominant faction. In Foucault’s words, ‘the exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power. (1980, p51). Discourses emerge that are not objectively true, but manifestations of the system that instigated the search for ‘truth’ in the first place.

We are back to the ministerial forward, and the executive summary referred to above where, despite evidence to the contrary, (Ryan 2019, Cohen 2018, Frayne 2015) the linkage between health and employment is made explicit. It should not surprise us then that a system that 'would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena to economic processes' (Foucault, 1977 p141) should decree that the best way to occupy our lives is to submit to the drudgery of work. It is, however, to the detriment of many disabled people's lives that this general politics has become accepted as the truth.

A second point to make with regards to power/knowledge is that Foucault is at pains to highlight that its application in modern societies is inherently *productive* not *repressive*. The powerful quickly recognised that overt displays of repressive power were unsuited to the modern age. Firstly, cracking heads not only leads to discord and increases the likelihood of rebellion but, more importantly, a cracked head would be unlikely to be able to complete the next day's shift at work. Instead, modern governmentality 'becomes a set of normalising strategies to govern subjects' conducts towards discipline and productivity in certain governmental institutions' (Peruzzo 2020, p4) - such as the workfare state. This process is not only instrumental, but also reflexive. It (re)produces a subject that can be legislated for/against in accordance with dominant modes of thinking at the same moment it produces (self)disciplinary targets that are promoted as ways to combat perceived (self)errancy. A clear example of this is the subjection of disabled people to governmental technologies such as the Personal Independence Payment (PIP) that uses pre-ordained definitions of disability to form descriptions of individual claimants that are often unrecognisable to the individuals themselves. A PIP, according to the Gov.UK website, is a benefit that 'can help with extra living costs' centred around 'daily living' and 'mobility' expenditure. It says (Gov.Uk online 2023):

"whether you get one or both parts and how much you get depends on how difficult you find everyday tasks."

The telling phrase in this 'reasonable' statement is, I believe, 'how difficult you find', because the testimonies gathered from countless people exposed to this assessment suggest that the person who ultimately gets to decide what constitutes this difficulty is not, bizarrely, the applicant but the assessor. An example taken from the SCOPE website illustrates this clearly. Describing a PIP assessment a disabled individual reports (Scope online 2021):

"They said I can prepare food, despite my carer in the assessment with me stating that I cut the top of my thumb off with a knife when trying to make food."

This builds a picture of a workfare system that is simply not working in the interests of disabled people. Of an individual under massive pressure from an assessor. Of an assessor under massive pressure from management, who themselves are incentivised by the rhetoric that currently emanates from Whitehall to cut and hack, slash and burn. If this total lack of empathy from the Department of Work and Pensions (DWP) is representative of other disabled people's experience (and a host of other similar anecdotes would appear to corroborate that it is i.e Mills 2023 online, Stewart 2018), we must begin to suggest alternatives to the existing system, such as legislating to ensure that disabled people are employed by the DWP to act as assessors during these assessments. This might go some way to beginning to restore the faith of those being scrutinised that their cases are being heard in a fair manner.



## **Bio-politics and Disability**

Foucault's investigations into the phenomena he termed bio-politics (2008 2020) have been justly assimilated into the work of disability scholars (Tremain 2015, Mitchell and Snyder 2015, Kumari-Campbell 2009). The utility of this concept lies in the way that it helps us to understand how governmental processes have sought to position disabled people in opposition to an ableist norm. Ableism, as adroitly defined by Campbell (2009 p5), can be thought of as:

"a network of beliefs, processes and practices that produces a particular kind of self and body (the corporeal standard) that is projected as the perfect, species-typical and therefore essential and fully human. Disability is then cast as a diminished state of being."

By developing a 'corporeal standard' a metric is developed against which all can be measured. Individuals and groups can then be subjected to technologies of discipline, surveillance, regulation and control that aim to modify or eradicate either behaviour or modes of being that are perceived to be deviating individuals/groups away from this norm. With regards to its application to disabled people, Mitchell and Snyder (2015, p9) write:

"Biopolitics involves a move towards a productive massaging of ways to live one's life appropriately within the community without disrupting the naturalised, normative activities of citizenship."

What is and isn't appropriate is not consulted, rather imposed (such as the historic subjection of people with learning disabilities to the WCA). As Campbell (2012, p212) archly notes:

"For too long there has been an almost indecent preoccupation with measuring and quantifying the existence of disabled people with the grand and commendable objective to know 'us' more."

In relation to my thesis, we can see this 'indecent preoccupation' manifests itself in a desire by governmental agencies to define the work an individual with learning disabilities is able to do because, as Campbell rightly notes (2012, p214), 'there is pressure in modern societies, particularly in developing economies, for us [disabled people] to show we are always productive and contributing.' The governmental order constructs an image of a 'good' normal able-bodied/minded individual who is happy to subject themselves to the constraints of work that is set against the 'bad' abnormal bodied/minded individual that either won't or can't. This latter group are thus conceived as outside the 'normative activities of citizenship' and become fair game for further 'productive massaging'.

Dean (2010) identifies the emergence of bio-politics as the moment when governments became interested in administering at a macro level whilst still continuing to shape society at a micro level. It arises out of a liberal conception that demands a frugal government and an increase in personal freedom, whilst at the same time expecting individuals to conform to the demands of dominant modes of thinking (e.g. work is good for you). Foucault highlights that (2008 p79):

"A constant interplay between techniques of power and their object gradually carves out in reality, as a field of reality, population and its specific phenomena. A whole series of objects were made visible for possible forms of knowledge on the basis of the constitution of the population as the correlate of techniques of power."

Under such conditions, defining populations and categorising their (in)abilities becomes a programme for a multitude of state institutions (health,

education, welfare) which seek to compare individual instances of being in relation to an officially sanctioned norm. As Campbell writes (2009 p 196):

“Ableist landscapes communicate the values of culture, its characterological objects, and secure the ‘memory’ of a body of people.”

A question thus arises around what constitutes an ableist conception of work. I would suggest that ableist society has created a landscape of work that is mapped with its own cartographic key: a key that identifies the good worker as able and individualised and the bad worker as someone unable to fit into the prescriptive routines of the modern workplace (Goodley, Lawthom & Runswick-Cole 2014).

## **Panopticism and Disability**

Whilst acknowledging the importance of both governmentality, bio-politics and power/knowledge as major influences on both the construction, maintenance and societal positioning of various modes of being, we must also consider how individuals come to adopt and accept them. A possible way of understanding the processes at play is to turn once more to Foucault and his concept of Panopticism (1977): in particular how it functions as a mechanism of self-regulation that causes marginalised groups such as learning disabled people to internalise the belief systems of the dominant faction.

In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), Foucault attempts to understand how power/knowledge works to understand and direct individuals/populations. He argues that it does so by unleashing two attack dogs: discipline and surveillance. Invoking Bentham’s Panopticon, he provides an incisive exposition of the way that power/knowledge enacts itself in a productive manner (1977 p202-203):

“He who is subjected to a field of visibility, and who knows it, assumes responsibility for the constraints of power; he makes them play spontaneously upon himself; he inscribes in himself the power relation in which he simultaneously plays both roles; he becomes the principle of his own subjection.”

Bentham (2011) himself imagined the Panopticon as a concrete structure. Constant supervision would prevent wrongdoing. Foucault’s genius was to take this almost forgotten (and widely ridiculed) carceral regime and argue that, rather than being an anachronism, it had metamorphosed to become firmly embedded in the modern world. To do so it had simply shed its fixed concrete structure and become abstract. By moving from the Panopticon to Panopticism Foucault argues that power increases its productive potential (Foucault 1980 p155):

“There is no need for arms, physical violence or material constraints. Just a gaze, an inspecting gaze. A gaze which each individual under its weight will end by interiorising to the point that he is his own overseer, each individual thus exercising this surveillance over and against himself.”

Governmentality when practiced well is not fixed and exterior to individuals, instead it 'swarms' (Foucault 1977) out of the fixed public realm and institutions to become internalised in the private world of the individual. The messages it disseminates in conjunction with other state apparatus (i.e incessant government pronouncements of the need to make work pay, media outlets reporting on exceptional cases of benefit fraud as if they were the norm, television programmes that wallow in sensationalist poverty porn) sculpt conversations the individual has with both themselves and the society they nominally belong to.

Through continual exposure to what Foucault describes as the 'gaze', the individual comes to perceive themselves as being observed at all times - *even*

*when they are not.* This causes the individual to police themselves in relation to any given societal norm (such as the belief in the importance for adults to be in some form of paid work) even if attaining this norm has a negative impact on the individual concerned. Campbell (2019), for instance, identifies a process of 'internalised ableism' that she suggests affects many disabled people as a result of being continually exposed to the societal norms of a late market capitalist state. At the extreme, the increasing numbers of suicides linked to the pressures of those under the gaze of the workfare system (Mills, 2023, Guardian Feb 2020) show clearly the danger of exposing vulnerable members of society to this unforgiving stare.

In the final analysis, my interest in the interplay between governmentality, panopticism, work and disability can best be summarised by an intriguing question posed by Titchkosky; namely, 'what would it mean to think disability out from the bureaucratic order it is bounded by today?' (2020, p207) Foucault's work holds great utility for me because it helps to understand what must be overcome in order to answer this question. His work on governmentality subjects power to the critical gaze that it routinely fixes on others. It reveals that there is nothing normal or natural about the current conditions that are imposed upon the lives of disabled people, instead suggesting that they are manifestations of a particular belief system that currently dominates Britain.

### **The myth of the work ethic**

At the heart of our daily lives lies a dominant belief system that promotes a persistent and pernicious myth: that of the work ethic. What I mean when I refer to myth is directly informed by the work of Barthes (2009). The unique quality of myth for Barthes is that it 'transforms history into nature' (2009, p154). He argues that mythical constructs, arising directly from the *weltanschauung* of dominant factions of society, are generated in order to naturalise a particular way of living. Barthes argues that myths are to be thought of as communicative rather than

natural. They are constructed to serve and transmit the needs of the status quo. Barthes adds that whilst myths are highly partisan, they are presented as neutral and natural: “underneath the rule discover the abuse.” (Barthes 2010, p108). When encountering any myth, then, we need to attend closely to what those who are responsible for constructing and maintaining the myth intend the impact of the myth to be.

The myth of the work ethic was constructed initially by early Protestant believers as a way of resolving the doubt and guilt that arose from making money in a society that previously defined avarice as a cardinal sin (Weber 2002). In order to account for the accumulation of wealth in nascent industrialised societies, new tales needed to be woven that allowed the individual to retain this wealth without compromising their soul. The myth of the work ethic was developed to assuage this cognitive dissonance: it became acceptable to make and hoard vast quantities of money, because this was viewed as a sign of divine favour.

Quickly co-opted by capitalism, a moral explanation of attaining salvation was transformed into an ethical duty. As Weber notes, ‘the Puritan wanted to work in a calling: we are forced to do so.’ (2002, p181). The ethic communicates to us that it is natural to work and abnormal not to work. Retaining a quasi-religious remnant from its inception in the early days of Protestantism, it suggests work both as the apex of human achievement and, if the work is backbreaking, precarious and poorly paid, as a duty to be endured. It suggests (paradoxically) that dependency from others can be overcome and freedom won by committing to a life of paid labour. Weeks (2011 p8) writes:

“That individuals should work is fundamental to the basic social contract; indeed, working is part of what is supposed to transform subjects into the independent individuals of the liberal imaginary, and for that reason, is treated as a basic obligation of citizenship.”

We need only take a moment to scan the injustice and inequality that exists in modern Britain to understand who this myth benefits. Drawing on phalanxes of experts, hard work (for someone else's benefit and in order to receive always less than one is worth in exchange) is presented by the state apparatus and the 'leisure class' (Veblen 2009) as a panacea; able to cure poverty, isolation, depression and increase wellbeing. It is something, we are told, that we naturally want to do. Weeks (2011 p54), however, points out that it is nothing of the sort:

“More than an ideology, the new discourse of work is a disciplinary mechanism that constructs subjects as productive individuals.”

The inevitability of work is infused into a profit driven culture that expects its members to be economically productive or risk ostracisation. As Bauman notes, 'the work ethic called people to *choose* a life devoted to labour; but a life devoted to labour meant no choice, inaccessibility of choice and prohibition of choice' (2005 p19). Yet the myth presents work as the central component of life. Work as the good life. Work as the morally acceptable core of our being (Weeks 2001 p54):

“The ethics mandate is not merely to induce a set of beliefs or instigate a series of acts, but also to produce a self that strives continually towards those beliefs and acts.”

It supports conversations about strivers and skivers (Valentine and Harris, 2014) leaving little doubt about the relative moral standing of each group. Widespread acceptance of the myth of the work ethic informs perceptions of those who do not work. To be unemployed becomes a moral choice, not a societal issue. To be employed becomes a responsibility that mutates into a totality: even

when we are not working, we should be preparing for the next shift (Weeks 2011, p54):

“The ethic is advice not just about how to behave but also about who to be: it takes aim not just at consciousness but also at the energies and capacities of the body.”

We are back, then, to the Foucauldian process of panopticism, the turning in on oneself, the judgement, the surveillance and disciplining of the self in order to be attuned to society at large. If the myth of the work ethic is the only myth that is allowed to circulate, those who do not, cannot, or will not work risk the approbation from those who do. Societal pressure means that those individuals unable to transmute themselves into paid workers, may begin to view themselves at the very best outsiders misunderstood by society at large or at worst less than human, somehow marked and deficient. This is amplified by a governmental, conditional workfare system that treats the unoccupied as pariahs.

The myth of the work ethic perpetuates the notion that freedom and independence can be won by anyone who adopts the ethic as their mantra. But again the myth is duplicitous. It fails to reveal the full equation of freedom and independence. Weeks suggests that ‘work is often understood and experienced as a field of individual agency and as a sign of and a path to self-reliance’ (2011, p51) but, in actuality, there is scant recognition of the disconnect between (Weeks 2011 p52):

“Work as a path to independence and the fact that the individual is thereby subject to dependence on waged labour and delivered to the sovereignty of employers.”



Waged labour is synonymous with freedom in late market societies. When it is well remunerated the worker may be able to convince themselves that they are living the good life. Disposable income facilitates the metamorphosis from the supplicant worker during the hours of business to the bold consumer able to freely avail themselves of trinkets and baubles in an increasingly monetised leisure time (Bauman 2007). But as Lorey (2015, p5) points out, for many (including a disproportionate number of people with learning disability) 'paid work has brought neither freedom nor security.'

The myth of the work ethic concocts a vision of a single acceptable mode of being: working and fully paid. But this does not equate with the evidence. On the one hand anthropological studies conducted with the last vestiges of hunter gatherer tribes (Dyble, M. et al 2019) document societies in which the time spent working per week routinely amounts to significantly less than the 'natural' 37.5 hours per week expected in modern Britain. Additionally, studies from within Britain show that 'growth of output per worker has declined dramatically since the global financial crisis of 2008-09.' (Ilzetski 2020) Quite simply it would appear that people spend a lot of time at work not working. Why is this, given that dominant conversations suggest that it is something that brings such structure, joy and positive reward to otherwise empty and directionless lives?

## **Work and Disability**

Article 27 of the UN Convention on the Rights of Person's with Disabilities (2007) is clear regarding what young adults with learning disabilities should be able to expect when encountering the workplace. It states that disabled people have:

"the right to the opportunity to gain a living by work freely chosen or accepted in a labour market and work environment that is open, inclusive and accessible to persons with disabilities."

The work of a multitude of disability scholars over an extended period of time (e.g. Clifford 2020, Ryan, 2019, Grover & Piggott 2015, Hall and Wilton 2011, Roulstone 2014, Barnes and Mercer 2005) makes the argument that this mandate is simply not being upheld. The contention is that that disability is not well received by the principles that infuse modern workplaces. Grover and Piggott suggest (2015 p277):

“Competitive individualism and the extraction of profit from the work of employees means that, at a fundamental level, disabled people are disadvantaged in labour markets.”

Grover and Piggott (2015) maintain that this disadvantage manifests itself in three ways. Firstly, disabled workers are perceived as less productive than their able bodied/minded counterparts. This perception damages the prospects of disabled individuals attempting to enter the job market because productivity is an ongoing obsession of the modern workplace due to its inexorable link with profit. The unproductive worker is marked as unwelcome within the workplace (Grover and Piggott 2015). Secondly the disabled worker is seen by industry as being unable to adapt to the highly prescriptive rhythms of the modern workplace. Hours of business are expected to take precedence over hours of life. The disabled individual, who may have competing claims on their time (e.g. regular appointments with healthcare and social services, issues with transport systems etc, etc,) may find themselves disadvantaged when compared to the docile, ableist bodies/minds that have been acculturated to accept, without complaint, the work timetables imposed on them by their employers (Grover and Piggott 2015). Finally, the primary impulse of industry to produce profit means there is a reluctance on the behalf of employers to adapt the environment of their workplaces to

accommodate the needs of the disabled worker. An impulse strengthened and justified by the dictats emanating from Whitehall regarding the need for prospective employers to only make 'reasonable' adjustments to their workplaces. This feeds into another important barrier, arising from the current legislation, that stipulates that once an individual works for more than 16 hours a week, they face the risk of losing their benefits and may also incur higher taxes. Standing (2011) identifies this as the 'precarity trap': taking time to apply and receive benefits takes real effort and time. Once these payments have been secured, recipients are often loath to relinquish the reality of regular (though meagre) income as opposed to taking a chance on a job that may prove either temporary, poorly paid and ill matched to their requirements.

From the inception of a politicised disabled movement in the 1970's, activists realised the importance of equality at work as being central to progressing further the rights of disabled people. Within its first policy statement, the Union of the Physically Impaired Against Segregation (UPIAS 1974 p2) laid out clearly the problem facing disabled people:

“This society is based on the necessity for people to compete in the labour market in order to earn a living. To the employer of labour, the physically impaired are not usually as good a buy as the non-impaired.”

They understood the prestige and centrality afforded to paid work in Britain and realised that, if they were to be allowed to create a positive self-identity, they would have to find ways of entering the labour market. Sadly, almost half a century later, the same problem persists, with the demand side of the labour market still repelled by the idea of having to incorporate difference into its workplaces. The struggle for recognition in, and equitable access to, the workplace continues.

Fortunately for business, however, the opening page of the guidance from the Government Equalities Office following the introduction of the 2010 Equality Act provides happy reassurance for employers that they are safe to continue with the employment practices that have so badly served generations of disabled people. Showing its fealty to industry and capital the government office writes (2010 p2):

“Employers are only required to make adjustments that are reasonable. Factors such as cost and practicality of making an adjustment and the resources available to the employer may be relevant in deciding what is reasonable.”

This shameful dereliction of duty, which intimates that financial cost is of more importance than human worth, is indicative of a governmentality that only plays with concepts of equality and equity. We see the word 'reasonable' employed once more as a technology of subjugation and control (Slater 2017). One can hear the pious sighs of employers maintaining that they would love to populate their workforce with disabled bodies and minds, but that it just would not be 'reasonable' to do so. That an integrated workforce would be a wonderful goal were it not for the unreasonable 'cost and practicality' of incorporating difference into the workplace.

Britain's transformation from what Bauman (2005) identified as a 'society of producers' to a 'society of consumers' has served to only compound the difficulties faced by young adults with learning disabilities as they begin to engage with the labour market. Service industries now dominate Britain's employment market. According to recent figures 82% of the workforce are employed within this sector (House of Commons Library 2021). Service sector jobs are often built upon image, affect and presentation as a way to market and sell their often intangible and ephemeral wares (Frayne 2015, Weeks 2011, Srnicek & Williams 2016). As Weeks notes (2011 p69):

“employers want more from their employees than was typically demanded in the factories of the industrial era; not just the labour of the hand, but labours of the head and heart.”

This makes them more likely to employ individuals who fit their idealised vision of an employee most likely to be able to hawk their wares. Indeed, a continued problematic for the disabled worker is the modern obsession with visibility and image that defines the modern, affective workplace. Berardi (2019 p103) notes:

“I call power a regime of visibility and invisibility: the exclusion of different possible concatenations from the space of visibility.”

Within the regime of visibility of the modern workplace certain concatenations are acceptable and others *verboten*. It is safe to say that no international conglomerate pictures a young adult with learning disabilities as their brand ambassador of choice. What is visually possible within the space of the labour market is increasingly rarefied, and marginal groups, like young adults with learning disabilities, are undoubtedly disadvantaged.

Visibility and image issues are also evident in programmes that are supposedly designed to bring young adults with learning disabilities closer to the job market. It is to these that I will now turn my attention.

## **Employability and Disability**

The myth of the work ethic is supported by market driven constructs that make demands of the individual and ask none from the employer. As Grover and Piggot (2015) note, ‘much effort has gone into incorporating disabled people into an economic system they were designed out of in earlier years.’ (2015, p2). One

such effort is the exposure of disabled people to the construct of employability. A meritocratic myth pervades that by attaining the right qualities in the right quantities, the individual will maximise their chance of selection in a competitive job market. Conversely, failure to do so is understood as an explicit failure on behalf of the individual. Employability describes the perpetual duty of the individual to bring themselves as close to the job market as possible; expanding time and money in order to be job ready. Without wishing to appear glib, I think this gnomic term can be deconstructed to expose the situation faced by disabled people attempting to enter the labour market. In short, the profit obsessed, highly rationalised, precarious modern workplace only wants to *employ ability*. Employability programmes (into which young people with learning disabilities are often automatically enrolled under threat of benefit removal for non-compliance) create a competitive environment of self-betterment in order to striate and individualise the experience of job seeking and work (Stafford 2015). Indeed Stafford (2015 p77) is keen to highlight how the contracting out of employability programs causes its own particular set of problems. The first is 'cherry picking', which refers to providers selecting 'who participates in their provision'. The second is an issue of 'creaming' - the act of providing 'more intensive support to those who are more job ready', a process that contrasts with 'parking' - the act of offering 'the minimum, or no, support to those deemed further from the labour market (2015 p77). These programs also serve to make the economically inactive visible to the apparatus of the state, allowing technologies of surveillance and discipline to be brought to bear upon them (Patrick and Fenney 2015). Once again it becomes the personal responsibility of the individual to succeed on these programmes or face the (economic) consequences (Woodin 2015, Stafford 2015, Patrick and Fenney 2015).

Research conducted by Heap (2015) and Woodin (2015) suggests employability schemes are deeply inequitable. They report that the people most likely to be chosen for employability training by service providers are those

individuals considered closer to the employment market at the beginning of the process. Again, one can imagine that young adults with learning disabilities are not considered a safe bet by providers who only wish to report success stories. The proliferation of businesses taking money from central government in order to provide services to the disabled community means that, if targets and quotas are to be hit and contracts renewed, success rates must be quantified and justified. Success, in short, must be visible. Heap (2015) and Woodin (2015) suggest that processes of ‘creaming’ (the practice of providing more support to participants deemed most likely to succeed) and ‘parking’ (the practice of offering the bare minimum of support or none at all to those considered least likely to respond to employability training) are frequent within many employability programmes. This again points to a desire not to increase the employability of service users, but to work with those deemed to be capable of work so that business and industry are in the position to *employ ability*. This was foreseen by Abberley (1999 p12) when he wrote:

“A society may be willing, and in some circumstances become eager to absorb a portion of its impaired population into the workforce, yet this can have the effect of maintaining and perhaps intensifying its exclusion of the remainder.”

A body or mind that cannot be sculpted, that will not or cannot learn the scripts and peccadilloes of the modern workplace is thought beyond redemption and summarily rejected. This rejection is then compounded by the technology of conditionality that is used to take away the meagre financial support as a punishment for the failure of the individual. There is a paradox here that the successes of these wildly inequitable schemes are trumpeted loudly on front pages of websites and promotional literature that are eager to claim a share of the triumph, but when these very same institutions and businesses fail a young adult with learning disability, responsibility for this failure is abnegated by the

institutions and industry and placed directly on the shoulders of the isolated, discarded individual.

So far this work has only focused on the negative: the constraints and restraints placed onto the lives of learning disabled people. This risks presenting people with learning disabilities as powerless to act and at the mercy of the whims and peccadillos of dominant social and cultural discourses. But this is explicitly not my aim. I would like to introduce dissent and discord into my work and begin to investigate in the following chapter how we may trouble the current status quo.



## Chapter 2 - Future Days

“Something's happening and it's happening right now.

Ain't got time to wait.

I said something better change.”

The Stranglers - *Something Better Change*

### Chapter overview

This chapter will aim to introduce paths of resistance to the issues discussed in the previous chapter. It seeks to introduce hope, desire and provocation into my work. I will start by introducing two key concepts; namely, parrhēsia (Foucault 2010, 2011) and the Contact Zone (Pratt 1991, 1997, 2007), that possess this disruptive power. I will then discuss the aims and activities of the activist and self-advocacy movement that has done much to challenge ableist ideas around the agency of learning disabled people. I will then engage with theorists who have tried to work within the confines of the current system, and who promote the idea of 'alternative workspaces' as a solution to the problem of worklessness among people with learning disabilities (e.g. Hall and Wilton 2011, 2015 Grover & Piggott 2015). I will then move on to engage with another progressive imagining of how we might reimagine and reconstitute our current understanding of work and test its utility for young adults with learning disabilities. I will do this by looking at the idea of UBI+ as a way of securing financial security for people with learning disabilities, and giving them valuable time and space to begin to reimagine both types of work and the ways of engaging with work that would match their needs. (Weeks 2011, Frayne 2015, Srnicek & Williams 2016, Standing 2017).

### Introduction

Weeks (2011) provides a useful framework for the task ahead with her discussion centred around the distinctions between a *plea*, a *proposal* and a

*demand* (2011 p 131). Of the three, pleas are dismissed by Weeks as unlikely to bring about change due to their inherent 'solicitousness': there is by definition in any plea a recognition that the subjugated individual/group is meekly raising its concerns and awaiting the munificence of the dominant individual/group to accede. Likewise, Weeks considers proposals as unlikely to bring about change due to the 'aura of neutrality' that surrounds them. The inherent 'rationality' imbues them with a conciliatory spirit that allows opponents to push them into the long grass (e.g. the rational recommendations of the Dilnot report regarding the reconstruction of the social care system). Given that the disabled community has been attempting to find recognition in the labour market for at least 50 years, I believe that another approach must be tried. Weeks argues convincingly for requests for change to be presented in the form of a demand. To do so necessarily invokes the notion of a provocation. It also transmits to those receiving the demand that those making the demand do so from a position of 'antagonism, collective power and desire.' (2011 p131). It transmits a self confidence and 'belligerence' that informs the dominant group that voices and arguments must be heard. Weeks (2011 p32) notes:

“Utopian demands, including demands for basic income and shorter hours, are more than simple policy proposals; they include as well the perspectives and modes of being that inform, emerge from, and inevitably exceed the texts and practices by which they are promoted.”

### **Foucault: Parrhēsia & fiction**

After seemingly locking the subject in a nexus of governmentality, panopticism, biopolitics and power/knowledge, Foucault's later work spends an extended period rattling the bars of the cage he has set the individual within, attempting to craft keys with which the locks may be picked. As he himself says (1991 p 174):

"All my investigations rest on a postulate of absolute optimism. I do not conduct my analyses in order to say: this is how things are, look how trapped you are. I say certain things only to the extent to which I see them as capable of permitting the transformation of reality."

Sadly, Foucault died before his project was finished and so we can only guess as to how he would have proceeded, but in two important series of lectures from the Collège de France (2010, 2011) we have a clear idea of the project (and its enormity) that he saw ahead.

Stung by claims of pessimism and determinism (of the sort that the Frankfurt school were never quite able to shed) Foucault's work in the last period of his life switches to thinking through how the totality of power may be challenged at all levels. In order to do this, he begins to develop two arguments. The first revolves around a modern reading of the ancient Greek idea of parrhēsia (the courageous act of speaking truth to power) and the conditions and results of doing so. The second is the important possibilities held by fiction both to challenge 'Truth' as understood in enlightenment terms (singular, immutable, objective, etc.) and to create new truths to challenge this monolithic Truth. In short, Foucault argues that parrhēsia is the vehicle through which the powerless may speak, whilst fiction allows 'The Truth' not only to be contested but rewritten, and rewritten crucially, by the powerless.

Parrhēsia is more than just a right to speak though, (Foucault labels this right *franc-parler*, or free spokenness) because that 'right' is often meaningless when set against mechanisms of power. Instead, parrhēsia is an act that requires courage on behalf of the speaker because it is an act of sedition, an act that challenges orthodox and authorised thinking (Foucault 2010 p56):

"whatever the forms employed when one resorts to parrhēsia, there is always parrhēsia when telling the truth takes place in conditions such that the fact of telling the truth, and the fact of having told it, will, may or must entail costly consequences for those who have told it."

Standing up to orthodox thinking (e.g. the ministerial forward that contends that all work is beneficial to disabled people) requires courage because it brings the speaker into conflict with majority thinking. When, for instance, a young adult with learning disabilities states that they want to train as an artist, it brings risk because, as so perceptively noted by the disabled artist and filmmaker Bonnie Klein, 'to give permission to the artist in your body is an outrageous act of defiance' (2002, p41). People with disabilities are not meant to be seen in society, let alone have creative aspirations (unless of course they are caught in the technology of the Foucauldian 'gaze' and are under scrutiny by medical, legal, juridical, educational, academic bodies). This is why Foucault defines parrhēsiasts as 'those who undertake to tell the truth at an unspecified price'. (2010 p56). Given the tight nexus of governmentality that he has diagnosed, it can only be this way, but it is, crucially, possible (Foucault 2010 p66):

"Parrhēsia - and I am summarising here - is therefore a certain way of speaking. More precisely, it is a way of telling the truth. Third, it is a way of telling the truth that lays one open to a risk by the very fact that one tells the truth. Fourth, parrhēsia is a way of opening up this risk linked to truth-telling by, as it were, constituting oneself as the partner of oneself when one speaks, by binding oneself to the statement of the truth and to the act of stating the truth. Finally, parrhēsia is a way of binding oneself to oneself in the statement of the truth, of freely binding oneself to oneself, and in the form of a courageous act. Parrhēsia is the free courage by

which one binds oneself in the act of telling the truth."

Interestingly, for the powerless, Foucault contends that the best way to tell the Truth may be in the form of fiction. Due to the fact that Truth, defined by Foucault as being both informed and bound by power/knowledge, is often no more than the mouthpiece of the powerful, Foucault suggests that the powerless might do well to avoid it. Better still would be to play with the Truth, to bend and trouble it by introducing fiction to test it and hold it to account (Foucault 1980 p193):

"It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not as yet exist, that is 'fictions' it. One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth."

For the purposes of my work, I would suggest that the 'political reality' of the continued exclusion of young adults with learning disability from full participation in modern society (a 'political reality' instigated by precise acts of governmentality such as the application of particular dispositifs like the WCA to disabled people's lives) has created the conditions of precarity, poverty and anxiety that many disabled people experience in modern Britain.

Additionally, the disparity of training, development and employment opportunities for disabled and non-disabled school leavers 'fictions' historical pronouncements that ableist society is striving towards equality and equity for all citizens (e.g. 'A country that works for all' DWP 2016, p3). Finally, and crucially, the 'historical truth' of this ostracisation creates space for imaginings of a new politics

for disabled people where this disparity is addressed, thus fictioning 'a politics not yet in existence' into being.

Foucault described his work as a project to investigate the 'history of truth' (Foucault 1980). The choice of the word 'history' is important because it reveals Foucault's understanding that truth, rather than being eternal and immutable, was constructed in particular spatio-temporal locations to suit the needs of various political and economic regimes. Fiction is vital as a tool of resistance because it allows for alternative modes of being to be entertained and developed. Truth may be constructed by the powerful, but this act of construction leaves room for it being contested as a construct. As Lemke notes (2019 p360) any history of truth:

"exposes what ties us to our present, but in as much as it looks into the historical conditions of constitution for present day practices - in order to show their 'madness' or 'singularity' - it paves the way for them to be changed."

Fiction, Foucault contends, can be employed to 'manufacture' a state of affairs that 'does not as yet exist', such as parity and equity for young adults with learning disabilities in accessing training, development and employment opportunities that are meaningful to them. As Simpson (2012 p105) notes:

"Fiction thus has both a diagnostic function - it must be loyal to the present state of affairs, while also carrying a hermeneutic function - it is an alternative narrative interpretation of the present that has potential effects in the future."

Taken together, the act of parrhēsia and the adoption of fictions as a way to critique the given should be viewed as a practice of the care of the self, particularly when undertaken by marginalised groups. They offer hope to the marginalised of overcoming, contesting and refuting what is written about them,

and as such must be taken into account when thinking of how we may think out disability from 'the bureaucratic order that it is currently bounded by' (Titchkosky 2020).

## **The Contact Zone**

Pratt's concept of the Contact Zone (1991, 1996, 2007) is of real use to help us understand, analyse and critique the intersection of learning disability and work. I believe it also has great potential as a source of imagining how disability might be 'thought out' from the 'bureaucratic order' referenced to by Titchkosky (2020). As I shall describe in full later on it not only provides a space in which Foucault's concepts of Parrhêsia and fiction may thrive, but also describes the processes - transculturation and autoethnography - by which they can occur. The Contact Zone is important for my work; it helps to describe the conditions facing young adults with learning disabilities as they begin to interact with the realm of paid work, whilst simultaneously describing paths of resistance to descriptions and expectations of work as expressed by the status quo. Pratt (1991 p34) suggests that Contact Zones are created whenever dominant and subaltern factions collide in a particular location. She states:

"I use this term to refer to social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power."

Under this definition, the world of work can be readily conceived of as a Contact Zone. It is a contested social space where the intentions of individuals and groups 'grapple' for the right to define and delimit what is (or not) permitted within its particular space. Within my study, for instance it is possible to see the theatre company and the students and staff who constitute it grappling with various governmental and bureaucratic agencies for the right to define and

delimit what constitutes meaningful training opportunities for young adults with learning disabilities.

Pratt adds that conversations within the Contact Zone create 'speech communities' that serve to regulate action within a particular location (such as the world of work). Speech communities arise from the 'continuous negotiation among radically heterogeneous groups whose separate historical trajectories have come to intersect' (Pratt 1996 p6). At the outset of my work, it seems possible to define the interaction between governments, employers and young people with learning disabilities as an example of this. They are most certainly 'radically heterogeneous groups', and their 'historical trajectories' are interwoven with each other as government continually attempts to administer and direct the disabled community (Stiker 2000).

Unsurprisingly, Pratt suggests that in the first instance it is the dominant faction that initially dictates the rules of engagement. It is their protocols, customs and language that demarcate acceptable and unacceptable modes of being. Pratt (1996 p5) argues that:

“Contact Zones are often the result of invasion and violence resulting in social formations based on drastic inequalities.”

This is an apposite summation of the situation faced by the disabled community as they interact with a workplace constructed by successive British administrations in such a way as to best serve capital. The world of work can be understood as a Contact Zone that has its own speech community. In Britain the dominant group defines work by employing language and protocols that situate employment from able-bodied, neoliberal perspectives. These perspectives generate a particular idealised version of the worker (entrepreneurial, atomised, airbrushed, pliant and docile) that is exalted as the gold standard. In relation to



such criteria, the disabled worker is duly produced as a subaltern – their 'leaking, lacking and excessive bodies [and minds]' (Goodley & Runswick-Cole 2013) often viewed as aberrations by employers due to their inability to adhere to the arbitrary strictures, petty rules and regulations of the modern workplace.

However, Pratt argues persuasively that the status quo can be disrupted. The subaltern is not always powerless. Moreover, they possess the ability to take the language, rules and conventions of any given speech community and transform it by their otherness. This potentiality is present because the dominant faction cannot control the meaning of language employed within a speech community in perpetuity. Contact Zones are helpful to me because they undermine notions that the establishment can have the final say. Despite what edicts are handed down, there is always the (deferred) possibility of this same message being subverted, resisted or dismissed (Pratt 2007 p7):

"While subjugated peoples cannot readily control what the dominant culture visits upon them, they do determine to varying extents what they absorb into their own, how they use it and what they make it mean."

This echoes a sentiment articulated by Lyotard in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (a work that itself could be described as instigating its own Contact Zone, seeking as it does to use the gold standard of scientific enquiry, the report, to undermine scientific claims of legitimacy and primacy based on the scientific method). He writes (1986 p15):

No one, not even the least privileged of us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee or referent.

For Lyotard, all discourses (i.e scientific, artistic etc, etc) are to be thought of as facets of the larger concept of narrative. He suggests that, since the enlightenment, primacy has been claimed by Science regarding its ability to know the social and natural world. But he is at pains to uncover how this legitimacy is forged, and can only be maintained, by resorting to a circularity whereby Science creates both its own language and metrics that it then falls back on to create its own 'discourse of legitimation' (1986 pxxiii); thus undermining claims of rational detachment, objective observation and primacy. Science, he suggests, is not the only, but one of many ways of knowing the social. This conception of discourses as competing and clashing rather than hierarchically ordered allows for the idea of dominant discourses to be subverted and undermined.

Within the Contact Zone, the two processes identified by Pratt that make this possible are autoethnography and transculturation. Dealing with both in turn, Pratt (1991 p35) seeks to define autoethnography as a method whereby:

"people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them."

For instance, processes of governmentality produce representations of learning disability that are increasingly being challenged by the activist community. A strong example of this would be the reappropriation of the word 'cripple', and the adaptation of the neologism 'crip' by sections of the disabled community. For Pratt autoethnographic moments, events and texts do not occur in a vacuum. Rather they occur 'in response to or in dialogue with' (1991, p35) moments, events and texts produced by the dominant factions within any society. She argues (Pratt 1991 p35):

"Autoethnographic texts are not, then, what are usually thought of as autochthonous forms of expression or self-representation.

Rather they involve a selective collaboration with, and appropriation of, idioms of the metropolis or the conqueror."

Under such a conception we can see, for instance, how the word 'cripple', first employed in a medical and then pejorative manner by ableist society, has been appropriated by the activist community as an act of defiance and self-identity. Ricky Berwick, a prolific online disabled artist, constantly returns to the word 'cripple' in his absurdist skits (e.g. *Crip Train*, *Crip Train 2*, *Feeding My Cripple*, *Let's Play Crippled Mario*, *You Are Not Crippled* etc.) that are simultaneously funny and provocative. He often intentionally overuses the word in his pieces: the dada-esque reduction of a word to sound through repetition serving to highlight both the absurdity of the word and to reclaim the word as his to own. In the aforementioned *Crip Train*, he traverses the confines of a shopping mall, at the head of a procession of motorised wheelchairs yoked together, to parody the motorised trains that are often to be found traversing these spaces. As the 'driver' of the 'train' he uses his voice to warn pedestrians of the convoy he heads ('Choo, Choo! Choo Choo! Cripple Train! Cripple Train!') but also to challenge notions that: a) this is a space for able bodied people and b) that any non able individuals in this space need to know their place. As such he can be thought of as a *parrhēsiastes*. Speaking courageously he 'says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse.' (Foucault 2001, p12). As we shall see later in this work the theatre too is populated by similar *parrhēsiastes* determined to reconfigure and reimagine their own realities.

The second mechanism identified by Pratt at work within the Contact Zone is that of Transculturation. Pratt employs this term (1991 p36):

"to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture."

The key word here, I believe, is 'select': the idea of there being a choice available to subordinated groups (such as young adults with learning disabilities), and there being a possibility within the theoretical space of the Contact Zone for members of these groups to take what is given and transmute it for their own ends.

This resonates with me as I reflect upon the successful work of a variety of disabled activists and organisations that have appropriated the language of the state and used it to critique, reject and reform what has been visited upon them with regards to expectations surrounding their employment. An exemplar of this would be the forensic critique of the aforementioned green paper on work and disability by Bensted and Richardson (2017) that illustrates how the disabled community can contest dominant conceptions of disability. Their rebuttal of the governmental findings in *Smokescreen* (2017), adopts the formulaic format of the green paper (the working document of the state) and subverts it in order to denounce and renounce the findings of the official document. Their work reports on the report, speaking directly to it and its authors, at once denying the governmental apparatus the final word in positioning disabled people in relation to the labour market, and suggests a reconsideration and rehaul of current policy.

Finally, there is a playfulness and optimism in the idea of the Contact Zone that imbues it with a liberating potential. It suggests that the disabled people have both the agency and ability to critique and, ultimately, refuse to engage with the field of work if it remains resolutely indifferent to their needs. It affords disabled people the possibility of redefining what it means to be a worker in the early twenty-first century. Rather than accepting the ideology from the dominant

faction - that we must act out of competitive self-interest, that we must be atomised entrepreneurs focused on the pursuit of profit - the Contact Zone offers a tantalising possibility of the disabled people being involved in the reconstitution of the twenty first century workplaces as spaces of difference, cooperation, mutuality and understanding.

### **Activism, advocacy and resistance**

It will be remembered that Weeks (2011 p131) defines a demand as an articulation of 'antagonism, collective power and desire.' This succinctly describes the aims of the disability activist movement. Since the inception of the UPAIS in 1974, individuals and groups have worked tirelessly to agitate for an interregnum regarding the intolerable conditions faced by disabled people in their everyday lives. Given that at the time of writing both the current Conservative administration and, depressingly, the Labour Party, seem intent forming not equitable fiscal policy but rather a meek tribute act to the doyennes of financial constraint, former Prime Minister Lord David Cameron and his chancellor George Osborne (roll up, roll up for the magical austerity throwback tour folks), this task becomes ever more important.

Commentators (Atkinson 1997, Hollomotz 2018, Aspis 2021, Clifford 2021) remind us that disabled voices have often been edited or omitted entirely from research conducted into their lives. In particular, individuals with learning disabilities have often been viewed as unreliable narrators. This has led to 'the practice of seeking proxy responses' (Hollomotz 2018 p153) from gatekeepers (parents, professionals, support staff), who are assumed to have a clearer insight into the thoughts and feelings of the disabled individual, and also to be able to articulate these thoughts in a way more palatable to the academy. As Hollomotz notes, the problematic involved with this method of data collection is that 'proxies may find it hard to detach themselves from their own views and that such research may provide more information about the experiences and subjectivity of

the substitute persons than about the individuals concerned.’ (2018 p154) As Ribenfors (2021 p230) notes:

“There are inherent power hierarchies at play between the researcher and the researched. However, this power has the potential to be magnified when participants have learning disabilities.”

Raised awareness of these hierarchies has led to an increasing distrust of the academy by some disabled activists who are concerned that research is increasingly conducted *about* rather than *for* the disabled community. Aspis (1997, 2021) comments that she has ‘noticed increasingly that campaigns, projects and initiatives are no longer being led by disabled people with learning difficulties and their speaking up groups.’ (2021 p2). This is a serious accusation that demands serious attention.

My search across the literature for these pieces has revealed to me that many disabled scholars write from a perspective of a physical, rather than a learning, disability. Indeed, I found it difficult to find activists/scholars writing from this latter perspective. I believe this is quite telling and potentially suggests that a field of academic study initially created to investigate and improve the conditions of a marginalised group (individuals with learning disabilities) struggles to assimilate their voices into its combined output. This section will focus on the work of two activists, Simone Aspis and Di Lofthouse MBE who self-identify as having learning disabilities. Whilst the former has been published in peer-reviewed journals, the latter has not. Aspis (2021, 1997) has long been a fierce critic of what she perceives to be the industry that has sprung up around learning disability. As I am a member and beneficiary of that industry, her work makes uncomfortable, yet compelling reading. I understand that her concerns must be addressed and accommodated. With regards to Lofthouse, I could not find any

written pieces. Instead, I will use a short video (NHS England 2017) that she created to describe her involvement as an ‘expert by experience’ with the Care and Treatment Reviews (CTR). I will use her testimony to begin to understand the activist experience: I will suggest that her eloquence counters medicalised notions that individuals with learning disability do not know what they want and must be guided through life. I will also suggest that there is a real opportunity to bring learning disabled scholars/activists into the heart of the academy so that their voices may enrich and inform our field of inquiry.

### **Organic Intellectuals and Activism**

Gramsci (2003) challenges the notion of a dispassionate academy populated with objective academics abstracted and removed from their subject matter. In a famous statement he suggests that ‘the notion of “the intellectuals” as a distinct social category independent of class is a myth.’ (1971 p3) By this he means that notions of impartiality are but constructs developed to support the myth of independent and impartial research, which are done so in order to preserve the integrity of the academy in the eyes of the academy itself. In reality the academy is partisan and driven by political and personal motivations. His contention is that not only is to continue to support such a construction to be wilfully obtuse, but that to support such a conception of the academy, particularly in areas of research concerning marginalised groups such as people with learning disabilities, can only result in flawed research. He poses the following rhetorical question (1971 p5):

“Are intellectuals an autonomous and independent social group, or does every social group have its own particular specialised category of intellectuals?”

Fargas (1988 p300) suggests that this the reason that he asks this question is because:

“Gramsci is concerned both with the analysis of those intellectuals who function directly or indirectly on behalf of a dominant social group to organise coercion and consent and with the problem of how to form intellectuals of the subaltern social groups who will be capable of opposing and transforming the existing social order.”

Gramsci argues persuasively that social groups often do not exercise power directly, but through intermediaries who act on their behalf. However, with regards to subaltern groups, reliance on these intermediaries is problematic because it can develop or maintain a power imbalance. The group becomes reliant on both the largesse of these intermediaries to act on their behalf and also for the intermediaries to accurately reflect their views and opinions. As Hollomotz (2018) noted earlier, this is potentially fraught with risks. In order to overcome this, Gramsci argues that any subaltern group must produce its own ‘organic intellectuals’ - people whose lived experience can be relied on to inform their groups plans, objections and proposed actions.

To put this into concrete terms, we may refer to the ongoing battles between establishment thinkers and disabled activists over the socio-economic conditions faced by disabled people. Both sides have called on the insight and testimony of experts/intellectuals to promote their causes. In order to justify its ideologically driven transition towards an austerity infused conditional workfare state, the Conservative administration spearheaded by Neo-liberal ideologues, Prime Minister Cameron and Chancellor Osborne, turned to the work of two of its own intellectuals - Waddell and Aylward. With their careers ‘heavily linked to both the DWP and Unum’ [a private firm awarded the contract to enact welfare reform] (Clifford 2021), it is perhaps depressingly unsurprising that together they theorised a biopsychosocial approach to disability that ‘treated Incapacity Benefit trends as a social and cultural phenomenon rather than a health problem.’ (Clifford 2021 p239). Their work was seized upon by the aforementioned



administration that used their work to create a metric, the Work Capacity Assessment that brought chaos, stress, poverty and even suicide into the lives of disabled people (Ryan 2019, Clifford 2021). At its heart is 'the idea that it is the negative attitudes of many ESA [Employment Support Allowance] recipients that prevent them from working, rather than their impairment or health condition.' (Clifford 2021 p239).

However, rather than meekly accepting this attack on their wellbeing and prosperity, Clifford (2021) and Ryan (2019) identify this moment as a catalyst for an increased politicisation within the the disabled people's movement which responded by forming Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC). In the words of one activist, Bob Ellard (DPAC 2014 p7):

“Disabled people are enduring a vicious assault of cuts and hate propaganda from the austerity zealots in the coalition government who've been targeting disabled people, who they perceived as being the weakest in society. They were wrong.”

The strength of DPAC was demonstrated through a number of (continuing) direct action protests aimed at disrupting the fabric of ableist society. Additionally, DPAC created a vibrant online presence ([dpac.uk.net](http://dpac.uk.net)) that fosters a sense of community whilst informing, educating and mobilising disabled people about issues like the WCA. In Gramscian terms, this 'specialised category of intellectuals' worked to counter the state sanctioned message that sought to impose a new layer of conditionality onto the lives of disabled people.

Ultimately, the efforts of DPAC managed to enact a major change: Clifford, herself a member of DPAC suggests that 'forcing ATOS, a global corporation with a revenue measured in billions, out of its contract to deliver the WCA (Work Capability Assessment), was a significant victory for campaigners.' (2021, p286). I believe it is an exemplar of how a community of organic disabled intellectuals can

coalesce around a central cause and begin to inform policy debates at a local and national level.

## **Disability Activism**

It is possible to view the disability movement as an ongoing project of activism that has sought both to gain recognition, rights and respect for a historically marginalised and exploited group of people (Hunt 2019, Ryan 2019, Clifford 2021). In Britain the inception of the movement is widely credited to the letter sent by Paul Hunt to *The Guardian* in 1972 that railed against the continued segregation of disabled people within long stay institutions. His observation that many disabled people ‘find themselves in isolated and unsuitable institutions, where their views are ignored and they are subject to authoritarian and often cruel regimes’ (Hunt 1972) created the groundswell out of which a new militant disability activism grew. Hunt (2019) chronologically details how this letter led to the formation of the Union of the Physically impaired against Segregation (UPIAS) that in turn led to a proliferation of organisations campaigning against the discrimination, injustice and violence experienced by disabled people. The sentiment behind all facets of this movement can be best described with reference to the title of Charlton’s (2000) book that transmuted into a rallying cry for the activist movement in general: *Nothing About Us Without Us*. Speaking out against the oppression of disabled people, Charlton argues that degradation, dependency and submission have been experienced by disabled people in modern times. However, he argues that this negative experience was pivotal in politicising a generation of disabled people and directly led to them forming ‘a wide array of organisations to respond to political and personal needs’ (2000 p25). In particular, he argues:

“Nothing about us without us requires people with disabilities to recognise their need to control and take responsibility for their own lives. It also forces political, economic and cultural systems to

incorporate people with disabilities into the decision making process and to recognise that the experiential knowledge of these people is pivotal in making decisions that affect their lives.”

It is a call for recognition that lies at the heart of many disability organisations past and present such as Action on Disability and Development (ADD), Disabled People Against the Cuts (DPAC) or People First. What unites these organisations is a common idea disabled people should be deeply involved in organisations for disabled people, rather than disabled people being an adjunct to projects initiated by the able bodied majority. Charlton (200 p105) suggests that organisations constituted by and run for disabled people contain the possibility of creating:

“Self-help groups and webs of affiliation, the passing of notes and development of a history, the creation of alternative images and language, the contestation of reactionary systems all contribute to the evolution of a necessarily resistant counterculture.”

The isolation and segregation of disabled people has been identified by many writers (McVilly et al 2006, Callus 2017, Carpenter 2017, Ryan 2019, Clifford 2021) as a continued source of oppression. Highly regimented existences over which they often have little or no control result in a ‘lack of opportunity to foster and maintain relationships’ (Callus 2017 p3). This makes the creation of ‘webs of affiliation’ evermore important for people with disabilities.

It would be wrong, however, to view the disabled people’s movement as a homogenous mass. Rather like the wider society of which it forms a constituent part, there is no broad consensus as to the ultimate goals of the movement. As Clifford notes, ‘the concept of one united DPM (disabled people’s movement) is neither obtainable nor desirable’ (2021 p279). She argues that it is a broad church that is composed of ‘campaigners and organisations situated within an anti-

capitalist analysis and those who seek acceptance for disabled people within the neoliberal status quo.’ (2021 p279). There exists a dichotomy then between reformist and revolutionary outlooks. Between a goal of acceptance and accommodation within mainstream society and a more militant outlook that seeks an adjustment of societal norms to acknowledge the difference contained within the disabled experience.

## **Disability Advocacy**

A positive outcome of the disability activist movement was the focus on self-advocacy, initiated by organisations such as People First, as a way of helping individuals with learning disabilities to find their voices after years of institutionalist silencing. In speaking up for themselves, some learning disabled advocates realised they had the ability to begin to advocate on the behalf of other members of their community. This, I suggest, is important for two interconnected reasons. Firstly, when the learning disability activist engages in the process of advocacy, they do so within a field of professionals (psychiatrists, doctors, social workers etc.). It gives an arena for disabled voices to be heard and registered, not silenced and dismissed. Secondly, the individual with learning disabilities who chooses to provide their services as an advocate can be understood as an empowered individual engaging on their own terms with professional services. This has the potential to convince others that they too could do the same.

An example of this can be found in the NHS video created with disability activist Di Lofthouse MBE. In it she discusses her role as an ‘expert by experience’ advocate as part of the Care and Treatment Reviews (CTR’s) instigated by the NHS in 2015. Quoting directly from the NHS website (2017):

‘Care and Treatment Reviews (CTR’s) are part of NHS England’s commitment to transforming services for people with learning disabilities, autism or both.’

The stated aim of CTR's are to reduce the time spent by people with learning disabilities and autism on hospital wards and to look at ways of providing the correct support and care packages to individuals and families in order that they may return to live within their local communities. The then chief nursing officer, Jane Cummings, states (2017 @ 58 sec):

"CTR's were specifically designed to help reduce unnecessary admissions and to stop long stays in specialist hospitals."

The review is undertaken by a panel of professionals which, crucially, includes an 'expert by experience'. Lofthouse serves as one of these experts, and in a separate video provides an illuminating insight into her motivation for becoming involved in the process. In answer to the question: Why is it important to have people with lived experience involved in CTR's? she replies (2017 @ 1min 29 sec)

"I wanted people to have a better future than what I had. Help people learn how to grab opportunities as they come by, and take risks and make mistakes. When it's clinical you're not allowed to do that... so really it's not a proper life. You're not free, you're not... I dunno, it just feels wrong to me and I want it to be right."

This powerful answer speaks out against the historical injustices committed against the disabled community. Her assertion that people with learning disabilities have the right to 'take risks and make mistakes' suggests the presence of a critical consciousness that understands how decades of institutionalisation and surveillance limited the agency and freedom of disabled lives, whilst simultaneously articulating a desire to see parity gained with the able majority by being permitted to live a 'proper life'.

Indeed, further scrutiny of the short video shows both the depth of her politicisation, her understanding of the arbitrary able/disabled binary, and a sophisticated understanding of the challenges faced by people with a learning disability. In her opening statement, she declares - 'I live, breathe and eat rights.' (@21sec) This powerful metaphor - of rights being something by which she gains nourishment and the energy to sustain a life of activism - illustrates her understanding of their importance as a pathway towards equity for learning disabled people. For instance, Lofthouse references the 'right to choose what clothes to wear' (2017 @41 sec) when in hospital as evidence of the repression of rights that often occurs to people with learning disabilities. As a self professed survivor of both the healthcare system and disability hate crime, Lofthouse is eminently qualified to comment on the subjugation of people with learning disabilities in general and in hospital settings in particular. In answer to the question: Why is it important to have people with lived experience involved with CTR's? she replies (2017 @ 2min 15 sec):

"We know... and understand more... because we've lived it. We can put our feet in their shoes more... and they're a better fit for us than so called 'normal people'. I think what it boils down to is who is the real expert in this? And I would have thought that life experience is more of an expert than a qualification.'

Her use of synecdoche ('qualification') in order to define the professional services that often surround and dominate the lives of learning disabled people is both a concise and precise diagnosis. Additionally, it is notable that in the video she holds her fingers aloft and makes air quotes around the phrase 'normal people', displaying both a sense of irony and an understanding of the arbitrary nature of the ability/disability binary.

Lofthouses participation in the CTR video speaks directly to the concern aired by another activist, Aspis (1997, 2021). When talking about meaningful

advocacy, Aspis invokes the definition of advocacy generated by People First, an organisation run and controlled by individuals with learning disabilities. She argues that advocacy means (1997 p648):

“Speaking up for yourself; standing up for your rights; making choices; being independent; taking responsibility for oneself.”

Aspis worries, however, that the rights encapsulated within self-advocacy programmes often develop personal, rather than political rights (1997 p648):

“The courses focus very much on developing communication skills to interact with other people rather than skills and knowledge needed to gain change.”

She suggests that developing interpersonal skills, while important, will only maintain disabled peoples position at the margins of society. Only by becoming aware of the structures and policies that surround and define them will the disabled community begin to enact meaningful change. Aspis argues that there necessarily has to be independence at the heart of the disability movement, and to a large extent I agree with Aspis when she writes (2021 p6):

“After all, successful human rights struggles are usually led by the marginalised group of people. Campaign groups run by women, LGBT people, black people and even gig economy collectives have all run successful campaigns, projects and initiatives which have led to change and stronger rights for themselves.”

However, I believe that it is imperative that this independence does not mutate into isolationism. The movements cited by Aspis all found and colluded with allies within mainstream society which allowed their voices to be strengthened and their causes advanced. These previous struggles were advanced

by convincing the majority to recognise the commonality that existed between themselves and the minority identity. Their success came from the combination of direct action allied to theoretical and political work that challenged prejudice.

Lofthouse's engagement with the CTR programme provides an example of this. Her advocacy skills have developed beyond simply gaining the ability to communicate personal needs towards a politicised desire to advance the causes of her learning disabled peers. Her words suggest that self-advocacy skills can then be employed to challenge the status quo and materially improve the conditions of the learning disabled community.

### **The case for theorisation**

A recurring question that has haunted me throughout the PhD has been: *So What?* As I have attempted to position my work and theorise its implications, I have continually been aware that I, an outsider, may be on completely the wrong track. Engaging with activists like Aspis has served only to heighten this sense of unease. She writes (2021 p156):

“It is my opinion that too many parent activists and professional colleagues working for the establishment, including universities, public sector, big service providers and charities, are using all sorts of concepts to justify their role in disability rights work without any accountability framework.”

Gulp. Without reciting the full roll call of my privilege, I think it is probably quicker to say that I am caught square in the centre of Aspis' crosshairs. There is undoubted homogeneity within the academy (a proclivity to use words such as 'homogeneity' and, indeed, 'proclivity' being one such marker of this homogeneity). With prerequisite credentials required in order to penetrate it, one can see how the academy could easily be perceived as arcane and impenetrable.



However, it is at this very moment of uncertainty that I become ever more convinced of the utility of theory as a method by which to challenge orthodox thinking and propose alternative futures. Goodley et al (2019 p976) suggests that 'a key purpose of theory is to understand and intervene in the social world.' In my case, theorisation allows me to begin to construct a narrative of how I perceive the current situation of young adults with learning disabilities as they intersect with the world of work. But the world of work is not static. It is amorphous and ever changing. For example, the post-covid landscape of work will undoubtedly usher in wide scale changes to how and where we work. As Goodley et al (2019 p976) note:

"As activism and politics grow, disperse, fragment and spread out into numerous lines of flight, scholarly responses to such movements are required."

As political movements and ideologies ebb and flow, one of the essential roles of academia becomes to critique, understand and respond to that change. Allan (1996), for instance, makes reference to how employing a Foucauldian 'box of tools' offers the potential for gaining rich insight into the experiences of learning disabled students and how the status quo may be contested and critiqued. She also makes a powerful case for the researcher to include 'theoretical concepts and practices' in their work. In particular, by introducing 'philosophers of difference' (2011 p 159), such as the contrary, antagonistic writers and theorists who populate my work, she suggests it may be possible (2011 p159):

"to shift our attention within learning disability away from fault, blame and lack and towards something more positive."

Aspis is correct in her assertion that 'successful human rights struggles are usually led by the marginalised group of people.' (2021 p6), and this must also be

the case with the struggles faced by the learning disabled community. But there must also be recognition of the fact that as these previous and ongoing struggles began to gain traction, they co-opted support from individuals and organisations external to the marginalised group. Charlton (2000 p241) is phlegmatic about his goals for disability activism:

“Within the impossibility of the real end to disability oppression lies the possibility, even the probability, of significant political and social progress.”

To achieve this and more I believe we must work hard to move beyond the binaries that create false divisions and serve only to inculcate disunity and distrust (activist or academic, theorist or expert by experience). Campbell (2019 p143) adds to this sentiment with her observation:

“So the task, then, is not to deliberate in terms of ‘this or that’ or ‘either/or’, but to deontologise ontology which enables thinking in terms of ‘and’ plus ‘and’.”

She argues that false distinctions between academic knowledge and knowledge gained from lived experience create ‘abyssal thinking’ that serves only to promote and maintain a ‘constitutional divide’ between acceptable and unacceptable forms of knowledge. Instead, we are encouraged to think in terms of ‘aporias’: academic *and* activist, theorist *and* expert by experience.

Examples of this form of collaboration are beginning to percolate through the literature. A recent example (Armstrong et al 2019) details at length the trials and tribulations involved in creating co-produced work. It addresses important points such as how and what form of language should be employed for the finished research to be relevant to both the learning disabled community and the academy. It looks at the division of labour and how different skill sets may be combined to

produce rigorous, meaningful research. It also contains reflections from the academics and activists working on the project. In their closing comments, the activists lay out their blueprint for the future of collaboration between activists and the academy (Armstrong et al 2019 p1308):

We want more ways for activists and academics to work together co-productively. At the moment, even if self-advocates get short term contracts for participatory research projects, the university bureaucracy does not let them be equal...Maybe one day we will see self-advocates as an everyday part of university academic research and teaching, not just brought in as activists when needed.”

The academy must look hard within itself to discover ways in which this can be facilitated. I know, for instance, that the University of Sheffield is about to embark upon an exciting research project in anti-ableist research culture. This would seem to be an excellent start in reconciling the two approaches. My work too aims to introduce concepts (parrhēsia and the Contact Zone) into conversations around how learning disabled people may continue to challenge and question the current configuration of ableist society. If answers can be found, I believe it may usher in an exciting new phase in disability studies: reconstituting and reimagining the working relationship between activists and academia in order to continue the task of creating a fairer, more equitable and inclusive society for people with learning disabilities.

### **Alternative workspaces**

Hall and Wilton (2011, 2015) argue that the modern workplace is wholly unsuited to accommodate the disabled worker. They bring attention to the centrality of profit, rationalisation and a uniformity of working practices that serves only to discriminate against disabled applicants. They suggest that (2011 p867:

“Governments have focussed mainly on the employability of disabled workers and have spent less time figuring out how to make ‘mainstream’ workplaces more accommodating.”

They argue successfully that this imbalance must be addressed if disabled people are to be successfully assimilated into the world of work. Better still, they argue for the creation of 'alternative workplaces' that might be more successful in integrating the disabled worker into the world of work. One model they suggest is the social enterprise. Amin (2009) defines the unique characteristic of social enterprises as comprising ‘aspects of entrepreneurship’ that are ‘tempered by a strong social mission’. Their primary goal is not the creation of profit, rather the production of social value and community wealth. He suggests that the ethos underpinning social enterprises produces a working environment that is more conducive to the disabled community and encourages a supportive understanding atmosphere in which difference can be embraced and supported.

Wilton and Evans (2014) add to this sentiment with their comprehensive survey of 67 Canadian social enterprises. They suggest that alternative workplaces allow people who may otherwise struggle to access places of work to contribute to their local economies. They identify flexibility and security as the two co-existing principles that underpin many social enterprises. These principles allow social enterprises to be differentiated from business models centred around competitive self interest and profit. They argue that flexibility allows social enterprises to consider the needs of individual employees rather than expecting the employees to fit into prescribed modes of work. This might manifest itself in allowing a disabled individual who relies on public transport to start their shift at a later time, thus affording them more time to prepare for work and avoid the often heightened costs of commuting during rush hour. Flexibility also manifests itself in the use of job carving to shape the role to the needs of the employee, rather than expecting the employee to fit the role. Their paper recounts a tale of an individual who worked in a social enterprise cafe (Hall and Wilton 2015 p225):

“He’d start closing early because he got overly worried about the money. So we found there was probably a better fit for him working with the newspapers. Right now, he’s employed with the newspapers and he really enjoys it... We just try to fit everybody to the business so they’re gonna be successful.’

I would suggest that such a business model is unrecognisable for many traditional employers. It is not hard to imagine what would happen if this worker was unfortunate enough to be employed by one of the plethora of corporate coffee shops that litter the high street. They would be summarily dismissed for the ultimate crime of not maximising profit. Instead, job carving as a mechanism allows the role to be tailored to the individual, increasing the chances of success.

Security refers to the ability of alternative workplaces such as social enterprises to keep a job open for an employee in times of poor health or situations that call for them to be away from work for an extended period of time. Focus on things other than the maximisation of profit is an example of what Weeks terms ‘life against work’ (2011, p231). It is the recognition, on the side of social enterprises, that at times workers may have more important things to do than work. Other than tokenistic attempts by a minority of capitalist businesses to sanction ‘duvet days’ that attempt to convey a care for employees that simply doesn’t exist, the idea of something more important than work is an anathema to industry. Being absent for a shift quickly instigates technologies of surveillance and discipline (back to work forms/interviews & verbal, written and final warnings) that are characteristic of the modern workplace. That iterations of businesses can function without these mechanisms point to alternative futures in which employees are trusted rather than suspected.

Cramm, Finenflügel, Kuijsten & van Exel (2009) conducted research to uncover the non-economic benefit that employment can bring to individuals with learning disabilities. Their research aimed to answer the question: ‘What is important for you to enjoy your work?’ The respondents’ answers generated two

reported themes. The first of these themes was the idea of 'work as participation'. The individuals in the study valued being part of a collective task, however that manifested itself in the workplace. The second reported theme to emerge from the study was the notion of 'work as structure'. The participants reported that they enjoyed the fact that engagement with work provided a rhythm to their day and punctuated it with meaningful activity. The importance of the provision of environments where individuals with learning disabilities can nurture support networks and friendships is highlighted by Callus (2017). She argues that individuals with learning disabilities often live isolated, lonely lives, due to the fact that 'disabled people tend to be restricted in the physical spaces they inhabit.' (2017 p3). Callus argues for the creation of more spaces where those with intellectual disability can meet and engage in a shared activity as a way of surmounting this and forging positive identities.

Additionally, Roulstone, Harrington and Hwang (2014) found that 'flexible, personalised approaches' to the manner in which vacant roles are constructed, advertised and recruited play a large role in determining employment success for individuals with learning disabilities. Their work aligns with the recommendations of Beyer (2020) to the Welsh government arising from the learning of the Engage to Change program which focuses on how supported internships may be constructed and utilised to increase success for school leavers with autism and/or learning disabilities. They used focus groups, questionnaires and onsite observations to investigate work schemes that offer personalised support for learning disabled people. They discovered that when the personal requirements of each prospective worker are considered, then the likelihood of success on a work placement is increased. The report also highlights the importance of allowing individuals with learning disabilities to participate in job taster sessions before committing to a role. Doing so increased the likelihood of an individual successfully participating on the placement. Additionally, situations in which candidates with learning disabilities were offered the chance of working interviews (arrangements whereby the prospective employers are able to get to

know the needs, skills and abilities of prospective employees and consider how these may be applied to the job vacancy) allowed greater understanding of the possibility of success on both sides. They suggest that when such conditions are created the learning disabled person is framed as a potential worker, rather than a problem to be solved.

A problematic of alternative workspaces, however, is that they are created and exist within an economic system that explicitly links capital to labour in the form of a paid wage. A society in which *learning* disability equates with *earning* disability. Alternative workspaces do have the potential to be transformative, but it is unclear how young adults with learning disabilities could afford to engage with them. Reforming the workplace to provide more opportunities for young adults with learning disabilities to engage with the labour market would bring an immediate positive change to the lives of young adults with learning disabilities by providing environments in which they could learn skills and socialise with their peers. However, providing alternative workspaces would still explicitly link the worth of the individual to engagement with work; moreover, those failing to do so would still risk the moral indignation of the populace. Additionally, in a society that still affords primacy to labour that is attached to a wage, the wholesale engagement of young adults with learning disabilities in work that was either unpaid or poorly remunerated or would serve only to fix their position in the minds of society at large as second class citizens.

Another issue with alternative workplaces arises from the acts of governmentality that constantly attempt to categorise individuals with regards to their ability to work. Woodin highlights the desire of conditional workfare systems to 'reposition many disabled people as workers rather than welfare recipients.' (2015, p181). Those deemed to be more capable will be actively dissuaded away from these alternative workspaces by the imposition of conditional systems of workfare and pushed towards precarious, poorly paid work. It is for this reason

that I believe that alternative workplaces could benefit learning disabled people but only if they come to them unencumbered by financial concerns.

Capitalism is haunted (amongst other things) by the potentiality of lost time. Time taken without regard, permission or concession. Decades of families and communities splintered by the yoke of paid work that has become ever more present, evermore demanding and insistent. Precious free time away from work that is either spent recuperating from the demands of the working day, or preparing for the next day's instalment (Weeks 2011 Frayne 2015). It is for this reason that thinkers such as Apostilidis (2019) Frayne (2015) Weeks (2011) Jaffe (2021) Cohen (2018) identify the fight for time as a political struggle. If we can recapture this lost time, we may allow ourselves the ability to create different modes of existence. It is to this project that we will now turn.

## **Universal Basic Income**

A consideration that I would like to entertain for materially improving the lives of young adults with learning disabilities is the notion of making this marginalised group the test recipients of a Universal Basic Income (UBI) that retains a recognition from the state of the additional needs that many individuals with learning disability possess (UBI+). Weeks (2011), for instance, talks of the need to pit 'life against work'. (2011 p236) She asks us to remember that work is only a component of life, not its totality, and begins to plot how this transition may be achieved. Frayne (2016), details how we may begin to think about labour in terms of self production and the positive change this could initiate:

"Working for ourselves is what gives us a sense of connection with our environment and slots us into our communities." (2016 p 185)

This sentiment speaks directly to a sketch provided by Goodley (2017 p154) during his discussion of DisHuman labour. He introduces us to Dwayne who 'loves crushing plastic bottles' and 'has turned his passion into his job' by offering plastic



bottle crushing skills to his local community to facilitate them with their recycling needs. Although still embedded within the current system, Dwayne's unique passion can be seen as a gateway that 'slots' him into his locale. Furthermore, I suggest that Dwayne's engagement with work provides insights to the working population as a whole. I believe that documenting how disabled people interact with work can uncover valuable clues as to how we all may take time to reconstitute our working relationship with work. To scrutinise the working conditions that have been imposed upon us all and begin to agitate for a more creative, productive existence that is no longer exclusively tied to the exchange of time for money.

As Standing (2017) points out, the idea of a basic income is not new. Indeed, its roots can be traced back at least to the same scholar credited with coining the contested word Utopia, Sir Thomas More (1478-1535), and possibly much earlier. It is an idea that has woven itself in and out of the social fabric of history ever since. Standing (2017) identifies at least four different iterations of the movement. According to his argument the current, fourth, incarnation 'has been spurred by the emergence of mass insecurity and rising inequality as well as by concerns about labour displacement by robotics, automation and artificial intelligence.' (2017 p18). There is a growing concern that increased automation (Srnicek and Williams 2016 Frayne 2015) will disproportionately affect those at the bottom of the labour market, such as young adults with learning disabilities, serving only to widen these inequalities further. It is this concern that drives the UBI movement: recognition that in a society founded on capital, it is imperative to provide all members of that society with the monetary means not only to survive, but thrive.

Proponents such as Weeks (2011), Srnicek and Williams (2016) and Standing (2017) demand that any UBI must meet certain criteria. Firstly, it should offer basic security at a level that allows recipients to be 'able to obtain enough to eat and a place to live' (Standing 2017 p4) and 'to ensure that waged work would be less a necessity than a choice.' (Weeks 2011). If implemented it would, in the words of

Srnicek and Williams, ‘overturn the asymmetry of power that currently exists between labour and capital.’ (2016 p120). When the only option for survival is to submit to a life of work, capital can dictate the terms and conditions of employment. In a society where all are recipients of basic income this no longer holds (2016 p120):

“by eliminating the reliance on wage labour, workers gain control over how much labour to supply, giving them significant power in the labour market.”

The individual with learning disabilities would be freed from the punitive workfare state and find themselves freed from the pressure to accept poorly paid, precarious work.

A second condition of a basic income is that it should be unconditional. Standing breaks this down to suggest there should be no ‘income conditions’ (i.e. the income would not be means tested), there would be no ‘spending conditions’ (i.e. recipients would be free to spend the income as they wished and not be given a list of approved items in the way that the current voucher system dictates) and that there would be no ‘behavioural conditions’ (i.e. mandates about how the individual must behave to in order to secure payment.) Again, if adopted, UBI would radically transform the lives of young adults with learning disabilities, as they currently have to endure the income/spending/behavioural conditions that are at the heart of the workfare state. Finally, the income should be ‘regular’ and ‘continuous’, paid at regular intervals with an understanding that the income is both ‘non-withdrawable’ and ‘non-repayable’ (Standing 2011). This would afford young adults with learning disabilities a freedom that has always been denied.

Whilst the above formulation of UBI would certainly be egalitarian, it is not clear whether it would be equitable for the disabled community. Richardson and Duffy (2020) argue convincingly that a UBI alone would still serve to maintain societal imbalances. This can be understood by looking briefly at the difference

between equality and equity. UBI predicated on notions of equality alone would seek to treat all recipients in the same way and overlook the fact that some citizens would need extra support in order to live on equal terms with the rest of their community. The hidden costs of being disabled in an ableist society (such as paying to maintain a wheelchair, or to employ a support worker to facilitate independent living) would mean that disabled people would still find themselves economically disadvantaged. UBI+ proposes that these extra costs would be accounted for, thus making the system equitable: being disabled would not mean being disadvantaged. UBI+, then, would be a revolutionary possibility held within the reformist proposals for a UBI. For Weeks (2011 p145):

“Basic income can be demanded as a way to gain some measure of distance and separation from the wage relation, and that distance might in turn create the possibility of a life no longer so thoroughly and relentlessly dependent upon work for its qualities.”

For a group such as young adults with learning disabilities, who have historically been locked out of the job market, a society transformed so that it no longer valorises paid work as the measure of human worth would offer a revolutionary chance of, for the first time, participating as equals. It would also provide them with adequate finances whereby they could access training and development opportunities on their own terms.

Weeks (2011) goes further than Standing, decrying any need to be reasonable in making the demand for UBI. She describes UBI as being a provocation. She argues that ‘the demand for basic income offers both a critique and a constructive response’ (p2011 p 143) to our current situation. It offers a pathway to reform ‘key problems... of the political economy that renders it unable to function adequately as a mechanism of social distribution.’ (2011 p143) It does so by eradicating, amongst other things (2011 p143):

“The increasingly inadequate quantity and quality of waged labour manifest in high levels of unemployment, underemployment and temporary and contingent employment.”

For marginalised members of society, such as people with learning disabilities, who have been unremittingly exposed to the vicissitudes of the labour market, UBI+ would bring about immediate and lasting change. Weeks suggests that, 'as a provocation, a demand points towards the future' (2011 p145). The future that can be imagined for young adults with learning disabilities as recipients of UBI+ is one that is not constituted on notions of asceticism. Not having to make do, or to live in the margins. Weeks continues (2011 p146):

“Rather than preach the ethics of thrift and savings, the politics of concession, or the economics of sacrifice, the demand for basic income invites the expansion of our needs and desires.”

This is why I believe the demand for UBI+ for young adults with learning disabilities should be constituted as a provocation. It allies itself with Slaters (2017) understanding of the need of the disabled community to break free from the constraints of 'reasonable' expectations that serve only to police and subjugate them. Weeks argues that 'the demand is excessive, defying what are proclaimed to be reasonable limits on what we should want' (2011 p146). As a marginalised group, people with learning disabilities have for too long been told (and forced) to accept a truncated, dreary and deeply limited vision of how others believe their life should be lived. These are lives that are subjugated daily by the imposition of 'reasonable limits' on them. UBI+ answers Titchkosky's call to try to 'think disability out from the bureaucratic order it is surrounded by today.' (2020 p207). It uses money, the only true signifier of worth in a late capitalist society, as a way of bringing agency and possibility into lives that have been devoid of both for so long. In short, to appropriate the title of Fisher's playlist, it offers a potent idea of a future with 'no more miserable Monday mornings': 'from anger to sadness to

collective joy...from work that never ends to endless free time...' (2021, pp220-221). A mode of living where poverty, exclusion, worklessness, marginalisation and worry are removed from the consciousness of young adults with learning disabilities. Financially secure, they would be freed to reconstitute and reimagine, like Dwayne above, what work could both look like and mean for them. Additionally, by becoming the test recipients of a basic income, young adults could potentially become the vanguard of conversations about how able bodied/minded society should reconstitute itself. Beradi is clear on this matter when he writes (2019 p 95):

“The cult of competition must be replaced by the cult of solidarity and sharing.”

UBI+ offers a way of including all members of society in a new project: that of sharing the material wealth of our nation to ensure that lives can be lived not simply endured.

## **Final thoughts**

I have used this chapter to sketch out the possibility of alternative futures for young adults with learning disabilities, in light of the current inequity between learning disabled people and their non disabled peers when trying to access training and employment opportunities. I have weighed the relative merits of alternative workspaces and UBI+ with regards to their respective potentialities for bringing lasting and material change to this group. Whilst recognising the possibility of alternative workplaces to make a difference to the lives of young people with learning disability I believe that UBI+ offers the best chance of radically reconstituting their position within society. I am not naive enough to believe that the process will be easy, but I do believe it is possible.

From my vantage point, the manner in which training, development and, ultimately, employment opportunities are currently constituted for young adults with learning disabilities is limited, discriminatory and meagre. Because of this, I believe strongly that young adults with learning disabilities must have a right to refuse work if it is ill suited or poorly matched to their interests and abilities. However, this is tempered by the fact that I have absolutely no evidence that this is what they themselves want. Indeed, it has long been apparent to me that there is an undoubted, and possibly unresolvable tension when thinking of how and if people with learning disabilities should be brought closer, or kept away from the job market.

For instance, Warren, Garthwaite & Bambra point out that whilst ‘good’ work is good for health, ‘bad’ work is not” (2015, p199). They argue that disabled people often find themselves encouraged/driven into poorly paid, low skilled transitory jobs that they are ill suited to. The real danger of people taking up these jobs (alongside the impact on self-esteem) is that by doing so they render themselves ineligible to benefits. Then when the long term job prospect reveals itself to be zero hours, temporary or unsuitable they are left unsupported and without access to welfare, firmly stuck in the ‘precarity trap’ as described by Standing (2011). It is imperative, therefore, that if we wish people with disabilities to commit to work, the correct working environment is constructed and maintained to help them thrive.

Government agencies and departments do tell us that the majority of learning disabilities people want to work (Department for Work and Pensions 2016, 2023, All Parliamentary Group on Health in All Policies 2021), but to paraphrase Mandy Rice Davies, ‘they would say that wouldn’t they?’. The fact that it is governmental departments and committees reporting back to the government about this fact should make us cautious, because as Foucault identifies (1977, 1980, 2007), truth, power and knowledge often exist within a reciprocal

relationship. In reality, there is little analysis of whether work is actually something people with learning disabilities wish to do, or whether they are merely reacting to the constant rhetoric that permeates modern Britain. A rhetoric (born from the tyranny and long shadow of the workhouse - Bauman 2005) that is confident that any work, no matter how degrading, poorly paid or precarious, is preferable to unemployment. Berlant's idea of cruel optimism (2011) has to be taken into account at this point: it suggests that we may see the desire by many learning disabled people to be in work as a desire for something that is actually an obstacle to their flourishing. By yielding to governmental pressures and accepting McJobs in an attempt to fit into 'normal' patterns of adult life (Runswick-Cole & Goodley 2015), they may unwittingly consign themselves to a lifetime of precarity and poverty.

Although probably a truism, it is probably correct to assume that some people with learning disabilities want to enter the job market and others do not - much like the general population (21% of adults, or approximately 10 million people, of working age are currently 'economically inactive' - ONS 2023). It is not my intention to be so presumptuous as to prescribe a course of action for an entire group. Instead, I am more interested in addressing the ongoing disparity between disabled people and their non disabled peers. According to the latest published figures, there remains an employment gap between able and disabled people in Britain that stubbornly stays around 30%. (DWP Jan 2023). These figures have remained stubbornly resistant to change across the course of this government's administration. They suggest to me that something in the world of work simply isn't working for people with disabilities who wish to work. If this is the case, we need to think about the types of training and development opportunities for learning disabilities and think how we might match provision to skills and interests. Doing so might, I believe, facilitate better outcomes than the ones resultant from the current system.

Engagement with the theory around this topic affected a marked change in the type of research I became willing to commit to in this thesis. At the beginning of this process, I believed that it might be a good idea to document work programmes that were preparing young adults with learning disabilities for the labour market. Through the course of engaging with the literature, however, I began to have doubts that this might be the case. Reflection on the aims of my research brought an increased awareness that I did not want to investigate schemes that are attempting to bring young adults with learning disabilities closer to the labour market. Instead, I hoped to identify and collaborate with projects that are trying to provide creative spaces and meaningful occupations that allow people with learning disabilities to come together, train and develop, and begin to forge positive individual and collective identities away from work. What follows is my attempt to document a programme that seems to be endeavouring to achieve just that by providing young adults with learning disabilities accredited training and development opportunities in the arts.



## Chapter 3 - Designing the research

“What really went on there? We only have this excerpt.”

The Fall: Cruisers Creek

### Chapter Overview

The aim of this chapter is to explain the choices I made when designing and doing the research. It will be of interest to readers who would like to know how my project developed from start to finish, the ideas that informed the design of the research, and the methods and techniques I used to collect, analyse and present data. Silverman (2005, p305) suggests that there are four questions that every methodology chapter must address. These are:

- How did you go about your research?
- What overall strategy did you adopt and why?
- What design and techniques did you use?
- Why these and not others?

In order to answer these questions, in this chapter I will start restating my two research aims so that readers are clear about what I was hoping to achieve. I will then move onto the story of my research. Of how and why I identified a theatre company for people with learning disabilities as a potential research partner. I will then talk about how I recruited people from the theatre to take part in my project. This section is called *Research Setting and Participants*.

Following this I will write about the reasons for designing the research in the way I did. I will share the beliefs and ideas that I hold about how I think research should be conducted, and how these ideas and beliefs shaped the way that the research was designed and carried out. This section is called *Logic of Enquiry*.

I shall then spend time providing details of how I went about gathering information about the people and the theatre company and the methods I used to understand this information. These sections are called *Methods and Procedure of Data Collection* and *Methods and Procedure of Data Analysis*.

## **Introduction**

Before I continue further with the description of my work, I would like to mark how I intend to do so. Specifically, I will employ personal pronouns (I/Me/My) rather than third person throughout. This is because I feel that adoption of the first person is more in line with the subjective, constructivist, interpretative work that I designed and executed. From a continuity standpoint, I have used personal pronouns throughout the rest of the text and it felt, editorially, that to suddenly switch to the impersonal within this section would jar with the contents of the rest of the thesis. Additionally, I believe that adoption of the third person when referring to both oneself and one's work is both an unnecessary abstraction and an objectification of a process that was and is wholly subjective. I am also uncomfortable using the third person, because it seems to me to be self-aggrandising. I believe that to hide behind the third person, as if commenting upon and documenting the work of another is a methodological misstep. I am clear that this was my research project, initially conceived, designed and executed by no-one else. Along the way people were gracious enough to give me their time, energy and input that allowed it to proceed. To pretend otherwise would be an attempt to perform a Macavity-esque removal of the author from the text.

## **Research Aims**

The work described within this thesis had two proposed research aims (RA):

**RA1: To document and describe the processes and practices of a particular training provision for young adults with learning disabilities.**

**RA2: To document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term training program.**

These RAs were settled upon because I felt that taken together, they might begin to give some account of the processes at play within the organisation. To describe the building and the organisation alone would fail to take into account the people for whom the organisation had been convened; namely, the learning disabled artists who use the space as a place of community, training and development. Alternatively, to focus on the learning disabled students and artists alone, stripped of the context in which their training, development and social practices occurs, risked leaving the individuals in a vacuum and their training and development as acts of *sui generis*, rather than the result of interaction with the structure and support of the organisation.

## **Researcher background**

I detailed the impetus behind this research in the *Overview of the thesis* section that forms part of the foreword at the start of this work. Here I will briefly detail the academic credentials that I brought to the PhD.

My academic background incorporates a BA hons in Philosophy, an MSc in Sociological Research and I am currently a recipient of a stipend from the White Rose Doctoral Training Program (WRDTP) as an Economic and Social Research Council scholar. With reference to both the MSc and the opportunities for professional development as part of my PhD program, I have benefitted

immensely as a nascent researcher in being able to access extensive qualitative training that I believe provided the requisite skills necessary to complete, to the best of my abilities, the study detailed below.

Finally, I can report that there were no conflicts of interest with regards to myself and the site and people who took part in the study. I was not, and am not an employee or volunteer at the company described within the research, and did not have any prior or subsequent personal or professional relationships with anyone that could have been seen to impart bias onto the study.

## **Research Setting and participants**

This research took place at a theatre company for people with learning disabilities. The company in question has existed for 34 years, and during this time has won national and international acclaim for its artistic output. It has been at the vanguard of supporting and promoting learning disabled artists to produce dramatic work to a professional standard. Work that regularly plays to national and international audiences. Work that challenges ableist conceptions of learning disability and contributes to ongoing conversations around the meaning of learning disability in modern society.

The location of the company is inside a large repurposed mill on the outskirts of a northern town. The offices and creative spaces are spread across two floors. Information taken from the company website reveals that the theatre currently has 22 permanent members of staff who are supported by a board of 7 members. The company also has an ensemble of 12 artists who are employed by the theatre in the various pieces that are produced and performed nationally and internationally. These artists frequently apply and successfully win substantial grants to devise, develop, produce and perform their own work either in house or on the road.

On the level 4 course (equivalent to the first year of a Bachelor's degree in the United Kingdom) are 7 students who were the focus of this research. The course is accredited by a northern university with a long standing reputation for its drama training. Everyone at the theatre refers to their endeavours as 'training' rather than 'education'. Reflection on this leads me to assume that this is because, in drama circles you train, rather than learn your craft (i.e drama training). The course runs from 10.00am - 3.00pm Monday-Thursday. The cost of attending is £50 per day, and I was informed by staff at the theatre that students must either self fund or apply to their local council for a direct payment (assessed by a social worker).

Each day is dedicated to a particular area of the arts. These are: Dance, Drama, Industry Studies and Music and seem aimed at providing the students with a thorough grounding in the practical and creative elements of arts training akin to the training their non-disabled peers are embarked upon at the accrediting university. The format of each strand is the same. Each term a new topic is introduced (e.g. Choreography, Composition or Commedia dell'arte), and the students create work that is then assessed as part of their progression.

Alongside this full time course sits three other strands of training provision. The theatre offers one day courses in dance, drama and music for individuals who may be beginning their training journey, or for people who only hold a specific interest in one aspect of the arts. In its commitment to being as accessible as possible, the theatre also runs two further courses, *Completely Theatre and Completely Arts* (names anonymised). In the words of the convenor of these two courses, the Partner Programme Lead and Access Champion (PPLAC) *Completely Theatre* was initiated (PPLAC interview lines 100-105):

"just to be able to open out the offer really for, for people to come in and enjoy and participate. So in a way, we don't have students,

we have participants because it's a slightly different focus. There's no outcomes, there's no sort of building on learning or anything like that. So we use ipsative assessment, so tracking the journeys of individuals"

Her description of *Completely Arts* suggests it 'is much more experiential and sensory.' (PPLAC interview lines 163-164). where 'if you have two weeks off because you're ill or have doctors, hospital appointments, whatever. It's fine. You can come late and you don't have to audition. And you can join at any time through the year. And that just makes it much more, much more accessible from a participation point of view (PPLAC interview lines 198-202).

Overall, when taken with the community and outreach programmes also regularly instigated and run by the theatre, it can be seen that the theatre is trying hard to be as accessible to as wide a range as possible of people. As the Head of Creative Engagement noted (HCE interview 369-375):

I think the more time has gone on the more [name of theatre] has become, er, better at not seeing things like community engagement and the work, the core business, as separate. They, they feed into each other so the looking after people, the, you know, social side of it, the benefits to people. You know we try to provide food with everything, you know the whole idea that we're all looking at about warm spaces...

From my personal experience 'warm' refers not only to the temperature, but the welcome that all who cross the threshold of the theatre seem to experience. A fuller description of this 'warm space' is to be found in Chapter 5 particularly in the section *The space of the theatre*. Here it will suffice to say that the space is impressive and expensively furnished. There is a sense of permanence

to the space, that it is a base, a home for both the theatre company - and by extension - the people who access it.

Upstairs is the office space, used predominantly (though not exclusively) by the staff of the company. A large open plan space is augmented by side rooms that function to accommodate the overspill of staff that attest to the growth of the company, as well as providing a meeting room where the interviews with students and staff were conducted.

### **Initial approach and consolidation**

The study as initially conceived was meant to involve a group of students engaged on a long term training program at a hospital in North Manchester. However the Covid pandemic caused the first major revision of my work: the training program was closed indefinitely due to the concerns of both hospital and school in question around the safety and wellbeing of the students.

Forced back to the drawing board, I began to consider alternative sites where I may be able to investigate further my interest in the intersection between learning disability and post-school training opportunities. Discovery of the theatre company came purely by chance. I had been reading a newspaper article about a dance collective of people with learning disabilities, and during the course of the piece the journalist had mentioned the name of the theatre company in passing. This reference in turn sparked a vague recollection of a distant conversation I had with a colleague who was a trained drama teacher. I recalled her enthusiasm for the company and its output and began to research the online literature that existed. Reading the ethos and aims of the company as stated on its website, I was immediately intrigued and excited by the possibility of conducting research in a creative environment. It linked with the reading I had been undertaking of Foucault's (2010) notions around parrhēsia, detailed earlier in the literature review, and the site itself seemed to be offering a training

program that seemed to fall outside of the usual provision for young adults with learning disability.

An initial unsolicited mail was sent to the general account of the company. It provided a general overview of my background, research interests and rationale for wishing to conduct the work. Within twenty-four hours the Head of Learning and Support at the company replied and initiated a dialogue with me. I was asked to provide further details of my study alongside any documentation pertaining to the study. I sent through working versions of the information packs for both students and staff for further scrutiny by staff at the company.

Shortly after I was invited to visit the company for the first of what would become my regular observation days. The format and form of these observations will be detailed in depth in the *Methods and Procedures of Data Collection* section of this chapter. During that first day, I had the chance to meet the students whose voices became the heart of this study alongside the Head of Learning and Development and the Performance Academy Director.

Following this initial session, I was fortunate to be invited back on site to observe on a weekly basis. My timetable was coordinated by the Head of Learning and Development and each week I would receive a schedule for the following week. In total, I spent 36 days observing 72 sessions. A typical day would run from 10.00 am - 3.00pm. All observations were conducted on site with the exception of one day that was spent with the students at an open day at a regional theatre.

However, to present this observation period as unproblematic would be to provide a false account of the process. In reality, this period was far more disjointed than as initially conceived within the serene confines of the timetable of research that was confidently and naively drawn up as part of my ethics application. In keeping with the timetable, I did in actuality commence my



observations in November 2021. It was at this point, however, that the idealised and actual timetables began to diverge.

The initial plan was to commence my observations in November 2021 and continue with them until the end of Easter Term 2022 before switching to data collection across the summer term of 2022. However, the initial observation sessions ended after a couple of weeks as the spectre of the Omicron variant hove into view. Across the period, the company instigated a comprehensive Covid protocol in order to protect both the health and the training experience of the students and artists accessing the building. As part of the infection control protocol, I was informed by the Head of Learning and Development that a policy had been put into place to limit all visits to site by individuals considered non-essential to the daily running of the company. As an outside researcher I naturally fell into this category.

Given the complex health needs of some of the students and artists on site and the contradictory messages emitting from central government, the company was naturally cautious about removing the protocol. This meant that I was unable to return to the site before March 2022. However, by this time the students of the training Academy were putting the final touches to their end of year pieces and the end of year showcase that would be the central to their accreditation for the year. The Head of Learning and Development and the Academy Director informed me that, with the best interests of the students in mind, they believed that to commence data collection at this point would be an unnecessary distraction. I concurred absolutely, and so it was decided that whilst I would observe other elements of the theatre company (one day courses, devising days, artist rehearsals of upcoming productions etc.), actual observation and data collection with the Academy students would take place after the assessment period in the summer term of 2022.

Unfortunately, this tentative plan was interrupted by a family medical issue that arose unexpectedly in May 2022. The outcome of this event was that I had to apply for a Leave of Absence from May - September 2022.

I finally returned to site in October 2022, almost a full year after my initial observations had commenced. Fortunately, no further disruption occurred and after an initial couple of sessions observing students and staff - primarily as a way of re-building rapport and re-introducing myself and my work - I commenced staff interviews in November 2022 and Student interviews in February 2023 (for full accounts of these see *Methods of Procedure and Data Collection*).

My final reflection on this protracted and disjointed observation period is that it allowed me to know something of the professional and personal outlooks of all the people who subsequently chose to take part in the research. It allowed me to tailor interviews to individuals with the aim of facilitating conversation between us.

### **Informants/recruitment**

The purposive sample was drawn exclusively from people onsite at the theatre company. In particular, the sample was from two distinct groups: the staff at the theatre and students enrolled on the three year accredited academy course developed and delivered by the theatre. During my observation period it quickly became apparent that alongside the aforementioned course the theatre also runs at least three other programs aimed at individuals who may at this point in time not be ready for the accredited course.

A decision had to be made, therefore, as to which group I wished to speak to about their training experience. I felt that to speak to students from all courses may have resulted in a piece of work that tried to spread itself too thin whilst trying to accommodate all voices into the work. In the end I chose the academy

students because it seemed to me that the training they were undertaking would furnish them with skills and an accredited qualification, whilst not directly preparing them for the labour market in the manner that employability schemes often do. Given that the aim of my work was to investigate the ongoing problematic between learning disabled people and employment, working with this group held the most potential for addressing this issue. However it was with a heavy heart that I made this decision, and the importance of speaking to all students is not lost on me.

In order to explore RA1 - To document and describe the processes and practices of a particular training provision for young adults with learning disabilities - I sought to recruit members of staff at the company to take part in the research. In the first instance, I composed an email outlining research aims, research methods, personal background and the impetus for the research. This missive was sent to my point of contact, the Head of Learning and Development who disseminated it across the company. From this mail, ten out of the total of twenty-two full time staff expressed an interest in taking part in the study. They were then sent the requisite information packs which included a written consent form.

**Staff Recruits:**

- Artistic Director (AD)
- Associate Artist - Drama (AAD)
- Associate Artist - Music (AAM)
- Associate Artist - Theatre and Engagement (AAT)
- Executive Director (ED)
- Head of Creative Engagement (HCE)
- Head of Learning and Support (HLS)
- Head of Performance Academy (HPA)
- Learning and Participation Coordinator (LPC)
- Partner Program Lead and Access Champion (PPL)

In order to explore RA2 - To document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term training program - I sought to recruit some of the students enrolled upon the Performance Academy training program. In order to do this, I was invited by the Head of Learning and Development to give a short informal presentation (10-15 minutes) to the Academy students in October 2022. Prior consultation with the Head of Learning and Development at the project informed the choice to make the presentation purely oral and took the form of a Q&A session in the round. Over the course of this informal presentation I introduced the students to my research aims, research methods and provided information of both my rationale and personal interest in the topic under investigation. At the end of the presentation students were free to ask me any questions in order to clarify anything that I had failed to explain correctly (memorably this Q&A spilled out of the session and into the break that followed - see Chapter 6 *The Activist Panel*). Students were encouraged to take away an information pack to read and possibly share with a parent or guardian as they saw fit. As all students were over eighteen, I was aware that although this consent from parent/guardians was technically not necessary, in reality I suspected that the parent/guardians of these students would be formidable gatekeepers that would have to be on board if students were to consent to participate. Students were given until the start of the Winter term (January 2023) to decide whether to participate. In total five of the seven students agreed to take part in the study alongside one of the Artists at the theatre. Once they had agreed to take part, the students were encouraged to choose their own pseudonyms that could be used when reporting their speech. All six did so and are listed below:

### **Student Recruits**

- Bob - Academy Student
- Bryan - Academy Student
- Jackson - Artist

- James - Academy Student
- Tink - Academy Student
- Tom - Academy Student

My theoretical and ethical convictions directly inform the amount of personal information I am comfortable sharing about the people who were gracious enough to spare the time to speak with me. Perceiving, as I do, the 'nexus of governmentality' (Lemke 2019) that emanates from the 'bureaucratic order' through unceasing acts of governmentality and imposes itself onto the lives of learning disabled people, I feel certain that more than enough metric data has already been mined from these individuals. Learning disabled people are potentially the most described, codified and observed section of society and, during my time working alongside both adults and students with learning disabilities, I have seen first hand the seemingly endless acts of quantification and assessment they are exposed to. I was resolved not to add to this data. These same concerns informed my decision to list the students rather than putting them into a table. I worry that to do so would have been to commit a Bourdieusian act of symbolic violence: placing names into tables risks objectifying people, and inserting a power differential into the work that I would never wish it to attain. As Žižek (2008) argues, the way we talk or write about the other can (un)intentionally sustain narratives of domination. I was keen not to introduce this into my work.

Additionally, I moved away from the idea of generating pen portraits of the students because I worry as to whether a brief summary of 'defining features' can ever accurately portray the individual, especially when the final arbiter on these 'defining features' is the author of the work and not the person in question. I did momentarily harbour the idea of asking the students to self-generate pen portraits but, as I did not know if any students were reluctant writers, and this was not an investigation into the composition skills of the informants, I decided against this idea as well.

## **Logic of Enquiry**

Of the four research paradigms identified by Guba and Lincoln (1994), Constructivism best describes my worldview, the aims of the study and, most importantly, the requirements of the people at the centre of my research. As Bryman notes Constructivism 'challenges the suggestion that categories such as organisation and culture are pre-given and therefore confront actors as external realities they have no role in influencing.' (2016, p28). At the heart of Constructivist understandings of the social realm is an ontology that perceives social 'reality' as something that is made and maintained, constructed and contested by conversations between social actors at the micro, meso and macro level. This seemed apposite when thinking of the young adults at the heart of my research. To a large extent, their identities were designated by others (educational psychologists, doctors, social workers etc.). Writers such as Stiker (2011) and Jarrett (2020) detail at length the work of the medical, legal and educational establishments to fix and locate learning disability. The resultant descriptions will have had an effect on how they are viewed and treated by ableist society.

However, the allure of Constructivism is that identity is not fixed. There is always extant the possibility of it being re-negotiated. Becker (1982 p521) notes that individuals and groups continuously create culture and that:

'no set of cultural understandings... provides a perfectly applicable solution to any problem people have to solve in the course of their day, and they therefore must remake these solutions, adapt their understandings to the new situation in the light of what is different about it.'

Reality, then, is best understood as neither fixed nor unchanging. Social actors, such as people with learning disabilities, are born into any given society which has its own particular conceptions of what learning disability is, what it can

do and achieve etc. However, a Constructivist ontology contends that this pre-given (and often prejudicial) conceptions are up for discussion. Through discourse and actions, individuals and groups have the power to re-imagine and re-interpret what is handed down. Given this, Constructivism seemed to be a sympathetic lens through which to engage with the theatre company.

Constructivism also appeals because it seems to allow the possibility of this one way process (of the expert defining the object) being undone. It allows for the notion to be entertained that reality is a product of mutual understanding. This mutuality is important, because it ushers in a consensuality. An understanding of social situations predicated upon agreement. Potter (1996 p98) notes that we can thus view the world as 'constituted in one way or another as people talk it, write it and argue it.' Under a Constructivist ontology it is no longer conceivable that one voice, or one *Weltanschauung*, prevails in perpetuity. Clearly, powerful voices (such as medical, educational, governmental ones) can hold sway, but they are open to acts of parrhēsia (Foucault 2010 2011) or acts of fictioning (Foucault 1980). Likewise, they are open to acts of transculturation and autoethnography, impulses that permeate any Contact Zone (Pratt 1991, 1996, 2007). Returning to the specific, people with learning disabilities have often been categorised without consultation. Within this categorisation reside discussions of (in)capacity and (in)ability generated from an ableist perspective. Historically (and contemporaneously) the (mis)treatment of people with learning disabilities has been predicated upon the false cognition that in all cases the expert - of whatever flavour - naturally understands the nature of learning disability better than the individual themselves.

A Constructivist ontology balks against this and argues - persuasively I believe - that knowledge of the world is co-constructed. Inevitably some voices will be viewed as carrying more weight than others, but there is the ability for less powerful voices to argue against dominant conceptions - such as what it is

possible for a person with learning disabilities to achieve after leaving school. We can come to understand the social world, then, by engaging with others and hearing the clash of ideas that allows new conceptions and new descriptions to be forged. Constructivism is useful for my research because it allows for the possibility of building theory. A Constructivist approach allowed me to focus attention on understanding how and why the particular phenomena observed at the theatre company were being manifested.

Indeed, the importance I placed on context again aligns my outlook with a Constructivist stance. In particular, I believe that what constitutes the phenomena we refer to as learning disability is constructed and contextual. Prior experience has led me to understand that, in the context of an ableist society (Campbell 2009), learning disability is constructed using predominantly negative connotations. However, direct experience gleaned across the course of my working life prior to my return to academia, had made me acutely aware that such formulations were at best wide of the mark and lazy, and at worst prejudicial and discriminatory. The idea of seeking out a creative environment in which to conduct my work reflected my belief in this contextuality. I went in search of a place that I thought might be providing room to construct learning disability in unusual ways. It occurred to me that a space devoted to drama training might be affording those individuals enrolled there a secure environment in which to play around with identities - both given and assumed. I wondered whether such an environment of experimentation might be affecting individual and collective understandings of who and what they were, and if through their creative work they were challenging traditional understandings of learning disability.

Another benefit from adopting a Constructivist approach was undoubtedly its ability to trouble the researcher/researched dyad. A Positivist approach would have involved positioning myself as the expert, the authority figure, objectively and dispassionately investigating the site and the people who



constitute it. Bauman (2000) reminds us of the duty social scientists have to treat the individuals recruited to any study as subjects rather than objects of investigation. He argues against social scientists adopting the scientific method as a gold standard from which to design and carry out research. Science, he argues, engages with nature, 'a numb being, a being which does not have its own story to tell.' (2000, p74). By contrast social science/humanities research investigates subjects that have their own distinctive identities and subjectivities. This inexorably changes the rules of engagement because (Bauman 200 p74):

"unlike in science, the dividing boundary between the experts and the lay people, between those with the right to tell the stories with authority and those who are allowed only to listen and take note, is far from obvious and difficult to draw, let alone defend."

Buber (2013) talks convincingly of initiating relationships with others predicated on 'I-Thou' rather than 'I-It' interactions to ensure that we interrelate with dignity and respect and do not objectify and exploit others. Throughout this research I kept these exhortations in mind. I was clear that I was not the expert of others' lives, rather an interested, invested observer hoping to detail the activities at the site in question. Indeed, on numerous occasions, I was aware of being the most ill-informed individual in the room, in that I had scant knowledge of both the site and the processes at play therein. I came to see the research process as an attempt to alleviate this ignorance. I arrived onsite replete with theoretical conjecture, but without any sense whatsoever as to whether these ideas were a) remotely connected to the actual experiences of the people onsite and b) of any use at all when attempting to understand and describe their situation. The conversations and observations I instigated were an attempt to test this prior knowledge: only through the process of engagement with the people at the site could this prior knowledge be tested.

Another attractive element of the Constructivist position with regards to the researcher/researched dyad is that it blows away any misconception of the researcher as the omniscient recorder of immutable truth. Bryman is once again helpful on this point when he states that, by adhering to a Constructivist approach, the researcher must accept that their 'own accounts of the social world are constructions. In other words, the researcher always presents a specific version of social reality, rather than one that can be regarded as definitive.' (2016, p28).

Moreover, rhizomatic accounts of the narrative construction of the self (Deleuze and Gutterati 1976, Sermijn et al 2008) suggest that 'there is no main entryway or starting point that leads to "the truth" (Sermijn et al 2008 p637), because a rhizomatic self has 'multiple entryways'. By this they mean that the narratives that an individual creates to represent themselves to themselves and others are multiplicities not singularities. I am, for instance, a PhD student, but I am also a father, a husband, a son, etc. How I answer a particular question may involve me drawing on some, all or none of these multiplicities to relate my narrative. Rhizomatic thinking allows us to note that when we hear narratives from others, what we are hearing are 'temporary takeovers by one story construction with the result that other possible constructions at that moment (for whatever reason) are excluded,' Sermijn et al 2008 p 641), rather than definitive unified articulations of "The Truth". Allan (2011 p159) suggests that rhizomatic analysis 'is non-linear, non hierarchical and instead wanders'. Loots et al (2017) add that 'there is no right entryway that will lead the researcher to the truth/the reality about an individual', because 'the rhizomatic self has many possible entryways and every entry will lead to other connections and different versions of selfhood in which the one is not more 'true' than the other.' (2017 p113) This becomes useful in analysis in that we can begin to ponder why a particular story construction is privileged over another by the respondent, and begin to inquire as to whether this is of importance to our analysis. What is presented in the later

sections, then, is not a 'definitive' account, rather a subjective attempt to understand the processes at play in the delivery of long term training to a group of young artists with learning disabilities, constructed from the received stories of the respondents.

## **Methods and procedures of data collection**

As Silverman perceptively notes, positioning oneself as a qualitative researcher 'settles surprisingly little' (2009 p33). The range of breadth and application is sufficiently diverse that it becomes incumbent upon the researcher to explain in detail how it is manifested in the particular context of their work. I aim to address this in what follows, but as an opening salvo I would like to state that my interest in pursuing qualitative research arises from my interest in observing and documenting behaviour in everyday situations. Specifically, in this instance, the experiences of a group of young adults with learning disabilities engaged upon a long term training program. I realised that a qualitative approach would allow me to 'describe how that phenomenon is locally constituted' (Silverman 2009, p43). This was important for me because during the course of my literature review I became aware of the limited scope of post-school training opportunities for students with learning disabilities, and I was keen to document the particularities of this successful project. Moreover, qualitative research is able to incorporate and be cognisant of contextual sensitivity in a way that is excluded from quantitative approaches. This linked naturally with my convictions re Constructivist descriptions of the social realm.

## **Data Management Plan**

In order to assure that the data was gathered and stored correctly in line with GDPR I created a Data Management Plan that formed part of my UREC application. A copy of this plan can be found in Appendix 4 This plan provided a protocol for the collection, storage curation and reproduction of data within the thesis and was adhered to throughout the process.

## **Research Design**

The research conducted and reported upon within this thesis takes the form of a qualitative case study. It employed a multi method approach: specifically, observation, videos and unstructured interviews to gather data about the site. The aim of the research was to document and understand both the environment in which the training is occurring and the experiences of those young adults participating in the courses. My reason for choosing this case was that, from the outside, it appeared to exhibit idiographic traits that seemed ripe for further investigation. In what follows I shall address these individually and provide the rationale for adopting them as the chosen methods to facilitate data collection.

## **Covid Resilience**

Once again, I feel the need to be open about the reality of the methods and procedures aspect of this work. In practice, the stresses placed on my scheme of work by the Covid pandemic resulted in a tightening of the data collection practices employed in the study. My initial idea was to offer the students a choice of creative methods (diaries, poetry, photography, walking interviews etc) through which they would be encouraged to document some of their experience at the company. The disjointed, and truncated nature of my time on site, however, meant that I felt it would be impossible to introduce the students to the demands of these various methods in any practicable manner worthy of producing robust data.

In the final iteration, I narrowed and refined my proposed collection methods. I decided that for the staff, I would rely on observations and a single 45 minute unstructured qualitative interview. With regards to the students, I settled on observations and asked them to select pieces of their creative work that they would be happy for me to film and that could form the basis of three short (15

minute) unstructured qualitative interviews. I thought this would be an appropriate method because I knew from my time at the theatre company that the tutors frequently used videos as a manner of providing immediate feedback to the students as regards to their creative endeavours, as well as forming the basis of their ongoing evaluation and assessment.

During my initial observation period (Nov21 - Dec 21) I had asked the Head of Learning and Development if it would be possible to have access to the archive of films, as I immediately recognised them as a potential source of rich data. At this point I was informed that this would not be possible as the films were considered to be in-house tools for the use of staff only. However, in an unexpected development during my final period of observation (Nov 22 - Jan 23), the Head of Learning and Development approached me and informed me that it would be possible for me to access the archive of these films and to use them as a potential source of data. I was not party to any discussions that had led to this change of heart, so am unable to comment on it directly other than to say that I was extremely grateful to the theatre company for this change of heart.

## **Observations**

As detailed above (see *Initial approach and Consolidation* this chapter) the observation period was more protracted than expected. In total, across the three periods, 36 days were spent onsite observing 72 sessions. I was typically onsite for two days per week. My timetable was organised by the Head of Learning and Development who would mail me a week in advance with a schedule for the following week. A typical day of observation involved arriving onsite between 9.30-9.45 am and spending time with staff and students in the Agora prior to the start of classes at 10.00am. Observations would continue until 1.00pm when the students broke for lunch. Again, I chose to spend each lunchtime with staff and students in the Agora in an attempt to build rapport and solid working

relationships. Observations of the afternoon sessions would recommence at 1.45pm and run until the end of the working day at 3pm.

In the initial sessions, unsure of both my place and not wanting to 'miss' anything, I very much adopted the role of the observer - pen and notebook close at hand and jotting copious entries into a series of journals. Following the advice of Atkinson (2020, 2017) the fieldnotes were constructed in the following manner. In the first instance, I focussed on initial impressions, things available to the senses, such as the look, feel and sounds of the particular locale in which the observation was taking place. Next, I tried to identify what appeared to me to be significant or unexpected about any given situation. In noting this I did register my feelings, but I also attempted to move past these personal reactions in order to attend to how those in the setting reacted to any given situation. The reason for this suspension of personal reaction was to attempt to identify local meanings that the staff and students employ to reproduce the space. Finally, throughout the construction of field notes I followed Atkinson's advice of focussing on the 'how' rather than the 'why': in particular how routine actions at the project are organised and executed in the hope that by understanding how the theatre company was produced and reproduced I might gain some understanding into its processes and practices.

Gradually, however, this role as detached observer began to be challenged by the warmth of welcome afforded by staff and students alike. In particular, the students would invite and exhort me to be involved in the multitude of warm up games that precede each session. As a natural introvert, with zero theatrical prowess, I initially found these invitations daunting but, in retrospect, am glad I did. I think that my inability to be anything other than useless at these games helped to build rapport and rendered me more human and fallible to both staff and students. My ineptitude helped to dissuade anybody, if there was any prior doubt, that they were in the presence of an 'expert', and certainly provided the

students with much comic material with which to tease me in between sessions. This move from pure observation towards participation also gave me a first hand sense of the skills and capabilities of the students enrolled on the course. By comparing my failures alongside their successes, it brought into sharp relief the talents that the students possess and that are being nurtured and developed within the theatre.

## **Fieldnotes**

I approached the task of documenting my observations following the tried and tested ethnographic practice of moving from jottings to field notes to thick descriptions: moving from field to desk, from direct experience to delayed reflection. Throughout this process my approach was guided in particular by the work of Fetterman (2020), Atkinson (2020, 2017), Van Maanen (2011) and Emerson, Fretz & Shaw (2011). The latter contest that field research consists of two distinct activities. In the first instance, the researcher 'enters into a social setting and gets to know the people in it' in order to begin to better understand 'the daily routines of this setting' (2011 p1). But what marks the researcher apart from the casual observer is that the researcher 'writes down in regular, systematic ways what s/he observes and learns while participating in the daily rounds of lives of others' (2011 p1). In the moment I relied heavily on jottings - 'a word or two written at the moment or soon afterward' (Emerson Fretz & Shaw 2011 p29) - to capture both what I was seeing and my initial reactions to these self-same events. Direction as to what and how to jot down notes was taken from Atkinson (2020) and Van Maanen (2011) who advise that researchers in the field focus on initial impressions of events and try to capture what is significant or unexpected about that event. Both suggest that the researcher attempts to move past personal reactions to events and instead attempt to glean 'local meanings' of what is experienced. In practice this meant noting down the key components of the sessions, events or interactions I was witness to, and recording the concrete sensory details of the events. As soon as practicable, these jottings were written up into more formal

field notes (see appendix 3). These attempted to flesh out the jottings and begin to turn them into more complete accounts of the onsite observations.

I suggest, from my Constructivist viewpoint, that these jottings and fieldnotes, rather than being definitive accounts of what occurred in a particular temporal-spatial location, must be viewed as highly subjective documents in which I imposed meanings and interpretations onto events informed by my prior learning and experience. Fictive accounts of the actual events. However, as I discussed previously in the literature review, thinkers such as Foucault (2010) and Lyotard (1985) show that such fictive renditions of experience are not only admissible as ways of interacting with and reflecting upon the social world, but should be conceived as being trustworthy ways of reporting events and occurrences in the field. Indeed, as Lyotard notes (1985 p5):

"But I do wonder more and more: Is there a real difference between a theory and a fiction?"

Such understanding informed my decision to include pieces of extended description in the three analysis chapters that follow. Atkinson worries that 'far too much reliance is placed on one dimensional data, often derived from interviews, which results in equally one-dimensional kinds of analysis.' (2015 p60). Over dependence on interviews with individuals can be problematic because this approach:

"can tell us little about social action within a given setting. It can tell us nothing about how people actually engage with one another. It tells us little or nothing about the achievement of social order within a given setting."

In order to present fuller, more rounded representations of the places and spaces in which the action of the research occurred, Atkinson suggests that



'vignettes' are employed by the researcher 'to anchor generic statements about the social world, social process or cultural domain under discussion' (2015 p 154). Elsewhere Atkinson (2020), when discussing ethnographic 'tricks of the trade' makes a case for researchers including in their work 'vivid, graphic description of a specific locale or event.' (2020 p 68). He suggests that the purpose of this textual device (2020 p68):

"can often serve as an introduction - either to the work as a whole, or to a particular section. It can function like an arresting opening line or paragraph in a work of fiction. It draws the reader in, invites her or him to share vicariously the experience of 'being there'."

In the following chapters the reader will encounter my attempts to do just this. Beginning with *Scene 1 - Warming Up* at the start of Chapter 5, and which I believe serves as an introduction to the analysis 'as a whole', the reader will encounter five 'Scenes' that are interspersed with the analysis. They are all extended reflections on events that I observed during my time on site and are intended to complement the analysis. For instance, in Chapter 5 readers will find *Scene 2 - The Drumming Lesson* which is intended as a bridge between the analysis of the Co-Facilitator that precedes it and the analysis around Co-Facilitation and Co-operation at the theatre that follows. My aim here, as with all of the 'Scenes' contained in this work, is to share with the reader some of the daily activities of the theatre company that I witnessed and 'draw' them in. Events that I believe are illustrative of both the processes and practices involved in the daily reproduction of the company and the underlying ethos that informs these actions.

## **Interviews**

When designing the research, due consideration was given to the form and format of the interviews that I hoped to initiate. Byrne (2002 p182) notes that 'qualitative interviewing has been particularly attractive to researchers who want

to explore voices and experiences which they believe have been ignored, misrepresented or suppressed in the past.' I spent time thinking about the various forms that interviews can take, and thought carefully about the type of interview that might be best suited to the needs of those who would be answering my questions.

Reflecting upon my prior professional experience of supporting both students and adults with learning disabilities I realised that people with learning disabilities are subject to interviews far more regularly than their non-disabled peers. Moreover, these interviews are of a particular ilk. I have been present when GP's, Psychiatrists, Police Officers, Educational Psychologists, Social Workers, Teachers, Support Workers, DWP Officers - to name but a few - have conducted interviews with people with learning disabilities. Unsuccessful interviews seemed to arise when the professional in question attempted to establish themselves as the 'expert' of the individual's lives. When there were strict and rigid formats to the interviews that prevented the individual under examination from expressing themselves as fully as possible. When they became exercises in non-listening and answers were ignored or curtailed.

Alternatively successful interviews seemed to occur when knowingly, or unwittingly, the Rogerian principles of Empathy, Congruence and Unconditional Positive Regard (Rogers 2004) were invoked. Interview spaces where the individual seemed able to freely express themselves in their own time. Where they were free to direct the tempo and topics of conversation and to digress or extemporise as they saw fit. These general thoughts were the basis of my thinking when thinking of the structure and format that the interviews should take and led me to settle on the idea of conducting informal, unstructured interviews with staff and students alike. In what follows, I shall describe this process further and justify my decisions.

## **Unstructured Interviews**

The act of interviewing is, for Scheurich, 'persistently slippery, unstable and ambiguous from person to person, from situation to situation, from time to time.' (1997, p62). This rings true for me when I consider the range of people I interviewed across the course of the project. Some of the informants were individuals categorised as having a learning disability, whilst others had escaped this designation. Some were professionals, whilst others were students and the age of respondents ranged from early twenties to early sixties. Each had to be met on their own terms, rather than approached as an isomorphic mass.

These factors informed the decision to conduct unstructured interviews. Fontana and Prokos (2007) make reference to the 'how to' approach of interviewing often adopted by proponents of formalised interviews. They argue that this can be understood as an approach 'where the belief exists that the better [researchers] execute the various steps, the better they will apprehend the reality that they assume is out there, ready to be plucked.' (2007, p42). The interview, under this conception, becomes a process, a task to be worked through in order to extract the truth from the situation, rather than a privileged conversation with another human.

Unstructured interviews, predicated as they are upon an attempt to understand rather than explain, seem better suited to retaining the subjectivity of the respondent, rather than individuals becoming objectified cases. In Buber's terms (2005), the interviewer keeps in mind the fact that they are interacting with a 'Thou' rather than an 'It'. Fontana and Prokos (2007) build upon this notion with their suggestion that 'the researcher must be able to take the role of the respondents and attempt to see the situation from their viewpoint rather than superimpose his or her world of academia and preconceptions upon them.' (2007, p46). This chimes with Rogers' (2004) assertion of the importance of empathy on behalf of the interviewer as being an essential component of successful

interviews. This act of staying close to the respondent, rather than maintaining a professional distance, has the potential to remove some of the formality of the situation.

Fontana and Prokos (2007) are also instructive when thinking about how to execute a successful unstructured interview. They are keen to argue that, despite the lack of formal structure, this does not mean that the unstructured interview can be dismissed as a lawless space. They suggest that interviews are executed in 'diverse situations' that entail the researcher to respond dynamically within the space of the interview. They call for the researchers to vary and modify techniques in response to the particular situation of each interview. The interviewer must expect to be presented at times with points of view and assertions from respondents that do not fit neatly - or actively jar with - the researcher's understanding of a situation. To accommodate this, they suggest several 'tactics' that can be employed.

The first suggestion is that 'the researcher begins by "breaking the ice" with general questions and gradually moves on to more specific ones.' (2007 p70). The list of staff and student topics below details that this is how I endeavoured to begin the interviews. For the staff, my first question was an invitation for them to tell me about their job and the work they do at the theatre company, while the students were asked to describe and talk about the creative piece of work they had chosen. By doing this I was following Leech's exhortation to 'ask the easy questions first.' (2002 p666), in the hope that by doing so, informants would be able to relax into the interview.

During the interview, I also consciously sought to 'maintain a tone of friendly chat while trying to remain close to the guidelines of the topics of inquiry.' (Fontana and Prokos 2007, p70). Interviewees were allowed free reign to move between cognitions and ideas and I was willing to follow them down their 'trails'

(Trias Y Valls 2015), but my conception of the interview as a dialogically constructed entity allowed me to introduce my own trails into the interview.

## **Staff interviews**

In total, 10 interviews were conducted with staff between 9/11/22 and 16/1/23 (See Interview Log - Appendix 2). It was a purposive sample: the criteria for eligibility being that the prospective respondent should be employed in some capacity by the theatre company. 8 of the interviews took place in a private meeting room adjacent to the open plan offices on the first floor of the building. The last 2 interviews were online interviews: the researcher was based in the private meeting room and spoke to the interviewees at their home. The interviews were all recorded, saved and stored in accordance with the data management plan (see appendix 4). Scheduled for 50 minutes, the actual times ranged between 29 minutes 57 seconds and 1 hour 15 minutes 58 seconds. During interviews that appeared likely to last past the allotted 50 mins, I made sure to provide the respondents with a time check and the opportunity to cease the interview at 50 minutes.

In the week before the start of the first interview, I sent an email to those taking part: this contained a list of the five topics that I hoped to cover during the course of the interview. These topics were formulated as a set of questions intended to elicit narratives. They were as follows:

- I wonder if I can start by asking you about your job and the work that you do at (Name of theatre company)?
- How did you find out about (name of theatre company) and what made you want to work here?
- (Name of theatre company) has been running for 34 years. What do you think is the secret of its longevity?

- (Name of theatre company) seems to be a place where disability and ability work comfortably alongside each other. How is this achieved?
- What do you think the future holds for (name of theatre company?)

At the start of each interview, following the advice of Goodson & Sikes (2010) and Clough (2010) I reiterated my interest in stories and narratives in the hope that I could prime the respondents to relate their narratives about the theatre company. I also referred to the general list of topics that I hoped to discuss, but stated that I hoped that the conversation would be led by what the respondents wished to share. Again, this was done in the hope of inducing stories from the respondents and giving them *carte blanche* to direct the conversation. Following advice from King & Horrocks (2010 p53-55) I used 'probes' of Elaboration ('encouraging the participant to keep talking to gather more detail'), Clarification ('explanation of specific words and phrases') and Completion (asking respondents 'to finish a story that seems to have broken off before it's "natural" end.') in order to follow up responses from informants.

## **Student interviews**

In total 15 interviews were completed with 5 students over 3 sessions (see Appendix 2) with each student participating in three interviews. It was a purposive sample: the criteria for eligibility being that a student had to be enrolled on the three year accredited course. All interviews were conducted in a private room adjacent to the communal space. In accordance with my distress and disclosure protocol (see appendix 1) a member of staff was present to provide support to the students if required. In the event, all interviews passed without incident. The interviews were all recorded, saved and stored in accordance with the data management plan (See appendix 4). Each interview was scheduled to last 15 minutes. Given the busy daily schedule of each student I decided, in agreement with the Head of Learning and Support and the Director of the Performance Academy, that three short interviews would be preferable to one long interview.

In reality, the length of interviews ranged from 9 min 8 sec to 23 min, 12 sec. Given the brevity of each interview, a decision was made to separate the topics for discussion across the three sessions in order that the interviewer and respondents could remain focussed on one element of their artistic development.

In the week prior to the first interviews, I sent the Head of Learning and Development an email containing the topics I would like to cover so that they could be shared and discussed with the students prior to the first interview. The topics for each session were as follows:

### **Week 1 - Creative Work**

- Why did you want to share this piece with me?
- Is there a story behind the piece?
- How did you go about creating and shaping it?

### **Week 2 - Creative Journey**

- Where does your interest in the arts come from?
- How did you hear about (name of the theatre company)?
- What made you want to get involved/train at (name of theatre company)?

### **Week 3 - Creative Future**

- How is your training going?
- How have your skills developed during training?
- How will your training help you to achieve future plans?

At the start of each interview, following the advice of Goodson & Sikes (2010) and Clough (2010) I reiterated my interest in stories and narratives. I also invoked a phrase from Trias Y Valls (2015) work and indicated my desire to follow the respondent down their 'trails', rather than dictate the pattern of the interview.

I also employed the probes of Elaboration, Clarification and Completion (King & Horrocks 2010) detailed above.

Following the advice of Hollomotz the first interview revolved around a 'concrete reference tool' (2018 p158) - in this instance a short film of the student performing a piece of their creative work - that was used by the students as a starting point for the conversations. The students were told prior to watching the films that they could pause them at any point to explain to the researcher what was happening. In the event, all students chose to watch the films in their entirety before commencing the interview.

## **Methods and Procedures of Data Analysis**

### **Abduction**

I sought to make my own sense of the gathered data by following an abductive approach. At its core, abduction seeks to 'ground accounts of social situations in the perspectives and meanings of individuals actively engaging in these social worlds.' (Bryman 2016 p.542). It focuses on 'the meanings and interpretations, the motives and intentions, that people use in their everyday lives' (Blakie 2010 p89). Crucially, though this is not the endpoint. As Blakie (2004), Charmaz (2006) and Bryman (2016) note the researchers' role is to take these local interpretations and descriptions and to formulate 'a social scientific account as seen from these perspectives.' (Bryman 2016 p542).

Additionally, the abductive process appealed because it demands that the researcher acknowledges the personal perspectives and meanings they bring to the social world they encounter. In practice this meant bringing the content of the interviews with staff and students into conversation with, say, Foucault's concept of parrhēsia and testing its usefulness in describing and enhancing my understanding of what I had seen onsite.



Finally, it is this idea of conversation and dialogue within abduction that obviously made it an attractive strategy for data analysis as it appealed to my notions around constructivist ontologies. During the abductive process, Atkinson notes (2020 p72):

"Fragments of ethnographic observation are linked by textual passages of interpretation and commentary to construct a potentially plausible account."

As the reader will notice in Chapters 5, 6 & 7, which together constitute the analysis of the research, this linking of 'observation', 'interpretation' and 'commentary' describes the process I adopted. In line with an abductive approach, I sought to 'inspect instances or cases, identify salient features and draw out from them possible lines of analytic significance' (Atkinson 2020 p 73) [Indeed](#), I found this method, of bringing experience in the field into contact with the theoretical realm and using the abstract to describe the concrete, really helpful when thinking through and trying to better understand what I had seen and been told during the course of data collection.

## **Narratives**

The units of analysis at the heart of this research were the informants' narratives generated and recorded during the unstructured interviews. Eastmond (2007) makes three assertions about narratives. Firstly that 'stories are part of everyday life' (2007 p249), secondly that 'narratives are not transparent renditions of reality' (2007 p248) and finally that the researcher is heavily implicated 'in the production of narrative data' (2007 p249). I shall work through these assertions in order to describe my commitment to narratives and why I felt that analysis of narratives was suitable for this research.

In the first instance, it is the ubiquity of narrative as a mode of communication that suggested to me that they could be of worth during data collection. Barthes (1977 p79) suggests that narrative 'begins with the very history of mankind and there nowhere is, nor has been, a people without narrative... it is simply there, like life itself.' Such sentiments, about the centrality of narrative with regards to both how we understand ourselves and the world we inhabit are echoed by many scholars. MacIntyre (1981, p197) for instance argues that 'it is because we all live out narratives in our lives and because we understand our own lives in terms of the narratives we live out, that the form of narratives is appropriate for understanding the actions of others'. Bruner (2004) suggests that such is the importance of narrative in the way individuals conceive and perceive the world that we can think of our relationship to them as a binary: life as narrative/narrative as life. It is through the telling and retelling of narratives both to ourselves and to others that we begin to demarcate ourselves.

Stories allow us to reimagine ourselves and signpost the ways in which that transformation may occur. In this sense they become powerful agentic tools. They have the potential to show the possible, not merely the probable. Extrapolating to the students at the theatre company, I was keen to hear the stories that the students related about their experiences when engaged with their training course. I wanted to understand how this training fitted in with the story of their lives, and whether engagement with it was helping the students to craft new stories of possible futures.

Moving onto Eastman's second contention, I suggest that whenever stories are related, the teller at once assumes the dual roles of performer and editor: simultaneously choosing what elements of the event being described to present to the audience and also deciding how the story should be told. According to Sikes, what is gathered in the qualitative interview is 'not lives themselves, but rather texts of lives' (2010 p16). The researcher must recognise the fictioned

nature of any related event, either from the respondent during the act of the sharing narratives with the interviewer, or in any of the acts (fieldnotes, jottings, transcriptions, reporting etc) of the researcher during the course of the research. It allows analysis of stories to move beyond analysis of mere content and to allow investigation of why a particular story has been related in a particular manner in a particular spatiotemporal location. Understanding stories as much more than the content they contain allows the receiver of these stories latitude to extrapolate the story into a wider context. In this study, for instance, it allowed me to consider why students were producing particular stories of their training and development against the backdrop of the stories received from the staff at the theatre company that spoke of the practices and processes in play at the theatre.

Finally, Eastmond's assertion of the implication of the researcher in the production of narrative data has to be acknowledged. From the hours of observation and interviews collected and collated as part of this project I know that I have had the final say in both the format and the content of this thesis. It looks, reads and sounds the way it does because of the decisions I took to shape and present it in particular ways. I am under no illusion that it is a definitive account, rather *my* account of my time spent onsite.

Overall working with narratives involves centring 'as its object of investigation the story itself.' (Reissman 1993, p1). Specifically, this entails seeing 'how respondents in interviews impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives.' (Riessman 1993, p2). The narrative turn arises out of concerns regarding the suitability of applying realist, objective modes of enquiry to subjects. The scientific method of objectification, both as a detached approach and as an understanding of the phenomena under investigation, seems a false step when research is being conducted with other humans. Particularly when the individuals at the heart of the research are representative of a group

(e.g. people with learning disabilities) who have historically been objectified and de-personalised (Stiker 2011/ Jarrett 2020/ Foucault 1993). Indeed, Stivers (1993, p411) demands that 'those who have been objectified [should] now be able to define themselves, to tell their own stories.' To this I would add that the agency to tell stories should also be facilitated in whichever format the teller feels most comfortable (i.e visually, scribed, non linear narrative etc).

Just as informants curate narratives to represent themselves and their experience to their audience, it is vital to acknowledge that the researcher is ultimately, in the editing, curation and presentation of their work constructing their own narrative. A process of making sense of actions and events by turning them into a coherent narrative, understandable in the first instance by the researcher, with the hope that it may be transmitted coherently to the readers of the work. Riessman is explicit on this when she notes that 'the construction of any work always bears the mark of the person who created it.' (1993, p.v). How could it not? Just as the research process generated stories and narratives about the daily practices at the theatre company, so I took those narratives and imposed my own order onto them in order that they could be presented to readers as the story of my research. I am clear that another researcher, with another set of motivations and interests would have made a different narrative from what I received.

As Goffman notes, when sharing narratives, 'what talkers undertake to do is not to provide information to a recipient but to present dramas to an audience' (Goffman 1974, p508). This is done to convince others (and selves) of identities and positions held by the orator. Interest in the performative does not imply that a narrative disclosing information about the orators perspective is inauthentic (although stories can be purposefully constructed in this way) rather that they are storied with audiences in mind: 'To put it simply, one can't be a "self" by oneself; rather identities are constructed in shows that persuade.' (Riessman 2008 p 106).

Given this, I looked to analyse narratives with reference both to their presentation and my interpretation. As Riessman notes (2008 p106) 'we are forever composing impressions of ourselves, projecting a definition of who we are, and making claims about ourselves and the world that we test out and negotiate with others.' Moreover, it is important to acknowledge how a narrative is 'co-produced in a complex choreography - in spaces between teller and listener, speaker and setting, text and reader, history and culture.' (Riessman 2008 p105). I saw, and was involved in, multiple instances of this process during my time onsite.

Finally, using narratives seemed appropriate because they invite 'attention to broader contexts, beyond the interview or ethnographic situation.' (Riessman p139). In my literature review I attempted to locate the lives of young adults with learning disabilities as currently caught within a nexus of governmentality, as a starting point to finding solutions to Titchkosky's (2020 p207) exhortation to 'think disability out from the bureaucratic order it is surrounded by today'. As I shall go on to describe, the theatre company and its personnel are engaged in a creative endeavour that appears to be striving to do just this.

## **Analysis of Narratives**

Engagement with the data occurred throughout the lenses of what Atkinson, following Blumer, refers to as 'sensitising concepts' (2015 p57). In my case sensitising concepts such as governmentality, parrhēsia and the Contact Zone were used as lenses through which to begin to organise the received information. They were used in dialogue with field notes and interview data 'in order to generate further elaborations of the guiding ideas' (Atkinson 2015 p57). This active process was undertaken throughout analysis

During transcription I would frequently stop and annotate, briefly, passages that I believed were ripe for further investigation or illustrated concrete examples of the theoretical concepts I had brought to the project. In accordance with

Atkinson (2015) I am clear that codes and themes did not emerge from the data. They were not lying there, dormant and latent waiting only for my perceptive analysis to unearth them. Rather they were imposed and created by myself as a way of describing and ordering what I had seen and been told. I believe that this manner of engaging with the data fostered a healthy dialogical conversation between experience and theory.

Coding and the generation of themes was not undertaken with the aid of computer software. This decision was taken because I did not want to objectify the data and subject the voices of the respondents to the rational algorithms of computer software. There was a determination on my part to meet participants at a human to human level at all stages of the project, including during analysis. It felt an ethical misstep to bring scientific tools (that in other iterations are used to categorise and 'other' people with learning disabilities) to bear onto this project. Computer coding of another voice, particularly the voice of a marginalised other, risks, I believe, imposing an I-It relationship onto the stories rather than the I-Thou (Buber 2013) relationship I strove hard to achieve. Additionally, the recent history of learning disability (Ryan 2019, Clifford 2020) speaks of near constant mandatory interaction with I.T. systems and metrics that panoptically observe all elements of their lives. I was keen that my work would not be another exercise in applying efficient algorithms to the lives of those I had spoken with. I accept that by refusing to engage with coding tools that I may have missed connections that the forensic, detached, analytical software may have flagged up, but I would prefer to risk human error over algorithmic certainty.

Instead, in order to facilitate analysis and generate themes, I broadly adopted Braun and Clarke's framework around conducting Reflexive Thematic Analysis (2013, 2014, 2019, 2020). As Byrne (2022 p1393) notes, a distinguishing feature of this method is that it 'highlights the researcher's active role in knowledge production.' This dovetails nicely with the constructivist principles

upon which this research was conceived, constructed and executed. Braun and Clarke (2019 p594) suggest that Reflexive Thematic Analysis involves:

"the researchers' reflective and thoughtful engagement with their data and their reflexive and thoughtful engagement with the analytic process."

Adding to this, Braun (2015 online) suggests that there are two ways that Reflexive Thematic Analysis can be employed. In the first instance, it 'can be used to identify patterns within and across data in relation to participants' lived experience, views and perspectives and behaviours and practices.' (Braun 2015 online) Additionally, though it 'can also be used within a critical framework to interrogate patterns within personal or social meanings around a topic.' (Braun 2015 online). Taken together these two facets held great utility for me as I began to analyse my data: the former helping me to address RA2 and document the experiences of the students, the latter iteration helping me to address RA1 and understand the processes and practices in play onsite at the theatre.

Having eschewed coding programs for the reasons given above, I followed the method of the 'six step process' advocated by Braun and Clarke (2012, 2013, 2014, 2020) and elucidated by Byrne (2022). I shall detail this below. I did so because this again aligned with the abductive approach I sought to embed in my work: moving back and forth between 'data' and the 'analytic process' by means of engagement with the theory and the 'sensitising concepts' (e.g. the Contact Zone) that inform my work.

I started by listening to segments of each interview that pertained to each of the topics I had introduced to the conversations with staff (see p129) and students (see p131). This was done in order to facilitate **familiarisation with the data**. I did so without taking notes or attempting to begin transcription. This

allowed me to reacquaint myself with the mannerisms and syntax of each speaker, as well as giving me a broad sense of the part of the conversation I was about to transcribe. Following this I personally and manually transcribed the conversation using Apple Pages. Although time consuming, I found this immensely rewarding in remembering the 'voice' of each speaker and beginning to focus on the topics under discussion. I used the 'Comment' facility in Pages to make brief notes as I transcribed in order to reflect immediately on what I was hearing/transcribing. Whilst some notes were disparate and unconnected, I also found myself beginning to make repeated reference to what I thought could be instances of say, 'transculturation' or 'autoethnography': a direct example of thinking abductively and applying theory to the descriptions provided by the informants.

The aforementioned notes became invaluable when embarking on the next stage of my analysis: that of **generating initial codes**. Byrne notes (2022 p1393) that 'codes are understood to represent the researchers interpretations of patterns of meaning across the dataset.' To this Braun (2015 online) adds that:

"codes are the smallest unit of analysis that capture interesting features of the data potentially relevant to the research question."

This apposite summation describes my use of codes both to my transcripts and my fieldnotes. At this initial stage, I employed codes freely and understood that whilst some might 'stick', in all likelihood many would be discarded as the analysis tightened. My guiding principle when applying or generating a code was to follow Atkinsons (2015) suggestion of asking myself: "What is this a case of?" When actively generating codes (and the subsequent themes that followed), I was attempting to move 'from lay descriptions of social life, to technical descriptions of that social life.' (Blaikie 2010 p90). Codes were brief and attempts by myself to locate and describe instances of processes, practices and events onto the



individual dataset. Byrne's discussion of semantic and latent codes was helpful at this stage. The former 'can be described as descriptive analysis of the data, aimed solely at presenting the content of the data as communicated by the respondent.' (Byrne 2022 p1397) and were of use when trying to document the experiences of staff and students. Additionally, 'latent coding goes beyond the descriptive level of the data and attempts to identify hidden meanings or underlying assumptions, ideas or ideologies that shape or inform the descriptive or semantic content of the data (Byrne 2022 p1397) and thus became a useful way to think about the processes and practices that underpin the theatre company. At this stage I was focussing on individual transcripts, but as I repeated the process I began to become aware that I had assigned similar codes to various events and actions described by the informants. This led me to instigate the next phase of analysis.

Once coding of individual transcripts had taken place, I began the tentative process of grouping together codes in order to **generate initial themes**. As Braun notes (2015 online) 'themes provide a framework for organising and reporting the researchers analytic observations.' I found this definition helpful. For instance, when rereading the annotated transcripts, I realised that the codes of 'capacity', ability, 'capability' 'potential' and 'possibility' could be brought together under the general theme of 'The possibility of learning disability'. Doing so simultaneously organised the data and provided a platform for deeper analysis involving the theories and 'sensitising concepts' I brought to the process.

Once generated, I followed the recommendation of Braun and Clarke to **review potential themes**. In particular I was looking at the boundaries of each theme, that is what I thought it included and excluded. I also looked at the coherence of each theme in relation to the other generated themes and asked myself if they provided 'the most apt interpretation of data in relation to the research questions (Byrne 2022 p1405). In doing so I was able to discard themes that I felt either overlapped, or were unhelpful in my overall aim of describing the

processes and practices of the theatre and the experiences of the students enrolled upon the academy course.

The next stage was that of **defining and naming the theme**. This involved careful curation and selection from across the dataset in order to select extracts that I thought helped to 'provide a vivid and compelling account of the arguments being made by a respective theme' (Byrne 2022 p1407). Extracts were taken from multiple informants to build the narrative of each developed theme and to 'demonstrate the cohesion of the themes constituent data items' (Byrne 2022 p1407). Additionally, extracts provided the springboard for reflection and analysis around the theme and helped to directly inform the narrative of the analysis that I had begun to build. A process that involved 'interrogating what has been interpreted to be important about what participants said and contextualising this interpretation in relation to the available literature' (Byrne 2022 p1407).

Next, when **producing the report**, I reflexively reviewed the themes and considered both if they were both cogent and sensitive to the argument I hoped to build. I also followed Byrne's (2022 p1410) exhortation to ensure that 'where relevant, themes should build upon previously reported themes, while remaining internally consistent and capable of communicating their own individual narrative if isolated from other themes.' A good example of this was the aforementioned theme of 'The possibility of learning disability.' In initial drafts of the work, I had named this theme 'The possibility and capability of learning disability' because I had noted repeated reference to both in my interviews with staff. However, engagement with both my supervisors and the literature reminded me that, within disability studies, conceptions and notions around the word 'capability' were often contentious, and that capacity was often a term invoked by institutions such as the DWP to reduce or remove benefits. There stood, therefore, a risk that to include it could result in accusations of ableism being directed at my work. I also realised that my literature review had not engaged with these discussions and that

my position towards this word was under theorised. Taking both things into consideration resulted in renaming the theme which I realised still contained the sentiments and narrative of belief in the students' talents that I wished to convey and discuss.

Finally, I responded to the information gathered during the course of data collection by creating five 'Scenes'. These are extended pieces of descriptive writing that attempt to satisfy Atkinson's exhortation (2017, p11) to 'capture the social processes of interaction, the temporal and spatial arrangements, the patterns of embodied action and communication' that researchers encounter in the field. In my case they are an attempt to respond creatively to the creativity that I encountered everywhere onsite. They are an attempt to punctuate, or even puncture, the academic form of the thesis, with the aim of reminding the reader that the events described, discussed and depicted within the thesis are not dry, abstracted events that are to be mulled over objectively, but rather concrete moments during the training of a group of learning disabled students/artists. Instances of development that I believe work to illustrate the effect the theatre company and its training programmes have on the lives and outlook of those engaged with its courses.

## Chapter 4 - Ethical Considerations

### Chapter Overview

This chapter will be of interest to those who would like to read my reflections around several moments of learning that I have experienced whilst doing this research. I want to be frank and share with readers that the process has not always been smooth. There have been choices in the process that have not been easy to make, and at times it has been a messy endeavour. But rather than being a weakness, I want to present these challenges and changes as being a more realistic portrayal of the story of my project.

### Introduction

The methodology chapters were undoubtedly the most problematic section of the thesis to write, primarily due to my allegiance with a cadre of postwar French thinkers (Baudrillard, Derrida, Barthes, Foucault and Lyotard) who argue that the level of surety and conviction displayed within scientific genres of writing are both a posture and, ultimately, impossible to achieve.

In writing *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), Lyotard practises his own act of transculturation by describing the work as 'a report on knowledge.' By doing so, he sets out to use the gold standard format of scientific investigation - the report - in order to undermine assertions that this format is the exemplar of how the 'Truth' should be disseminated. Lyotard expresses an 'incredulity to metanarratives' (1984 p xxiv), due to their self referential (or should that be self reverential) nature: informed, directed and legitimated as they are by power.

And what is a methodology chapter, other than a metanarrative *par excellence*, 'a report on knowledge' of the thesis itself. (Lyotard 1984). Any methodology constituted under the metanarrative of the scientific method is

expected to contain surety and clarity and provide the reader with an untroubled roadmap for the reader to safely navigate. And it is this that makes methodologies potentially problematic. Metanarratives are duplicitous, Lyotard maintains, because they present authorised ways in which things (such as Methodology chapters) should be presented and known as the *only* way in which things can be presented and known. Indeed, of scientific knowledge, he notes that in the post-industrial world, this particular articulation of knowledge, 'in the form of an informational commodity indispensable to productive power' (1984 p5) is inevitably presented by that self same power as the purest, truest form of knowledge and afforded the according 'status'. But Lyotard is keen to point out that this construction is fallacious because, 'in the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge.' (1984 p7). Rather than being the apogee of knowing, scientific discourse is merely one amongst a host of discourses in the social world, albeit one legitimated by capital and power. Indeed, Lyotard invokes 'another kind of knowledge, which I will call narrative' (1984 p7), as a counterpoint to scientific knowledge, as a form of postmodern knowledge useful because it 'is not simply the tool of the authorities; it refines our sensibilities to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable.' (1984 p14). It is this reliance upon narrative that I have sought to include in my thesis. However, by doing so, issues are raised that must be addressed.

### **Trustworthiness of data**

Any interpretative work, of which this is an instance, must contend with claims of relativism. Interpretation, a necessarily subjective act, clashes with realist epistemologies and the assertion of a correspondence theory regarding truth. As a starting point, Gadamer's notions around 'fusions of horizons' (2013) is of practical use. Gadamer's argument contests that claims of relativism could be upheld if we lived in a vacuum, adhered to (and upheld) individual ethical/moral codes and spoke with our own private language. But we do not. Research takes

place within particular social realms that broadly have ethical, cultural and linguistic norms. In short, we share horizons with others at micro, meso and macro levels. This allows any claims we make about the social world to be cross checked, not for Truth (as conceived, with a capital 'T' in Enlightenment terms) but for plausibility.

Building on this I used Riessman's criteria of Persuasiveness, Coherence and Correspondence (1993 p64-69) as ways of ensuring that the analysis and discussion in this thesis could be deemed to be trustworthy. Persuasiveness centres around a simple question: 'Is the interpretation reasonable and convincing?' (1993 p64). Attainment of persuasiveness, according to Riessman occurs 'when theoretical claims are supported with evidence from informants' accounts.' (1993 p64) As readers of the following sections will note, this was very much my approach when reporting and commenting upon data: moving between abstract theories and concrete experiences and attempting to reconcile both in a persuasive manner.

Coherence, Riessman suggests, allows the researcher to present their work as more than ad hoc interpretation. Coherence, in strong interpretative work, must exist on 'global, local and themal' (1993 p67) levels. In short, researchers must 'continuously modify initial hypotheses about speakers' beliefs and goals [global coherence] in the light of the structure of particular narratives [local coherence] and recurrent themes that unify the text' [thematic coherence]. (1993 p67). In my case this involved testing the theories and concepts I brought to the field (e.g. parrhēsia or the Contact Zone) against the testimonies provided by the staff and students in the hope that I could locate common themes that unite the combined narratives into a coherent whole.

Finally Correspondence, as described by Riessman, is the process of taking 'results back to those studied' (1993 p66) in order to ascertain whether 'the

investigators reconstructions are recognisable as adequate representations' (1993 p66) of the testimonies and observations gathered in the field. I tried to incorporate this into all aspects of data collection/analysis. In the field I routinely shared with students the jottings and field notes that I had made of their sessions, in an attempt to make the data gathering process as open and democratic as possible, and also as an immediate cross check as to whether I had documented what I had seen in a manner that matched their experience. I also used informal conversations with staff and students to signpost how my interpretations of the site were beginning to coalesce. During transcription, I attempted to produce verbatim scripts of the recorded audio, so that the staff and students could recognise their voices within the reported text. I also used the structure of the three interviews with students as opportunities to feedback my interpretation of what they had shared in order that I could check to see whether it corresponded with their actual intentions. Finally, I constantly shared my nascent analysis to ensure that respondents were comfortable with the connections and conclusions I was drawing from the dataset.

### **Defining the Interview Space**

From the outset, I was keen to think through how I wished to curate the space of the interview: it seems self evident to me that this aspect of the interview is wholly under the jurisdiction of the researcher and that the way that the researcher conceives of the space of the interview has a profound effect both on the nature of the resulting event that is referred to as an interview, and the information generated therein. Foley (2014) is clear that the manner in which the researcher constructs the respondent has an indelible effect on the resultant data. The interviewer must recognise that the interview is a site of explicit power relations and can be constituted as an instance of a Foucauldian 'regime of truth.' (Foucault 1991). It is incumbent, then, for any interviewer talking with marginalised populations to address this imbalance wherever possible and to mitigate against

it. In my case I sought to engage with theorists who could provide practical advice as to how I could sympathetically manage the space of the interview.

Following the advice of several commentators (Bhatt & Gentile 2021, Hollomotz 2018, Lewis and Porter 2004, Leech 2002) this process began prior to the interview stages during my observation period at the company. I worked hard to build rapport and strong working relationships with the students. To know a little about the personalities of the staff and students in advance of the interview and conversely to allow the respondents to have some sense of who I was both as a person and a researcher.

When coming to conceptualise the interviewee it was important to frame students and staff as respondents or informants. This is because I was keen to perceive them as much more than 'relatively passive reporters of information' (Foley 2014 p306). Instead, I was clear from the outset that staff and students were 'active participant[s], and a source of knowledge' (Foley 2014 p307).

At the start of each interview, I followed Leech's advice 'to ask the easy questions first' (2002 p666). Bhatt & Gentile note that 'it is beneficial to begin the interview by asking general non-threatening questions' (2021 p12) with the hope that the interviewer assists the respondent to settle into the forthcoming event. Consideration of question order became important because I realised that the order of questions could contribute greatly towards reassuring the respondent that the interviews I hoped to conduct would not be interrogative but rather dialogic.

Smith, Staples and Rapport (2015) frame the interview as an 'extraordinary encounter'; a 'bracketed space' jointly constructed and dialogically maintained by questioner and respondent. It is a space 'within which personal, biographic and social cues and norms might be explored and interrogated' (2015 p175), if care is



taken by the questioner to create conducive conditions for the respondent. This element of exploration and interrogation is in itself unusual. In our everyday lives we are not typically exposed to such processes. The students in my study, for instance, are engaged in their day to day training. With the fullness of their daily schedule it would be unproductive (if not impossible) to reflect, explore and interrogate each moment of each session. The interview, however, provides a 'bracketed space' within which the 'remembering and re-authoring' (Smith, Staples & Rapport 2015, p176) of events can be undertaken by respondents. The importance of this possibility cannot be understated.

Rapport notes succinctly that 'both past and future are at stake in the present moment of the interview.' (Smith, Staples & Rapport 2015, p176) and it is this factor that constitutes them as an extraordinary space. The interviewer is in the highly privileged position of being present as another consciousness (re)-calibrates and (re)-assesses their prior actions and cognitions, and through the (re)-telling and (re)-construction of these events (re)-assimilates a sense of self that is told both to the self and the other. Rapport adds that 'for research subject and researcher alike, it is the possible occasion of insight into the 'ordinary', the normal and the normative, the habitual and the conventional that is extraordinary.' (Smith, Staples & Rapport 2015, p181). The staff and students at the theatre company are engaged in the ordinary everyday practice of working to deliver and acquire skills and training in order to facilitate the development of a community of learning disabled artists. I viewed the interview as a place in which they may be able to step outside of this everyday process and reflect upon the experience of this creative endeavour. Smith, Staples & Rapport were helpful to my thinking with his observation that (2015 p181) 'from the vantage point of the interview one looks forward and back, one critiques and affirms, one plans and takes stock: one gains a purchase on a life, both as it is lived on the inside and as it might be espied from the outside.' This is not to suggest that interviewees do not operate without forethought or reflection outside of the interview space. This

would clearly be untrue. However, forethought and reflection are often private endeavours. The interview is extraordinary in that, if successfully executed, the interviewer witnesses these processes in motion in the moment of the event of the interview.

For Mishler (1991), it is the dialogical nature of interviews that renders them such an important tool. He argues that both sides of the process, the posing of questions and the formulating of responses are 'developed through and shaped by the discourse between interviewers and respondents.' (1991, p52). This conception renders the interview a dynamic process that is constructed at a discrete temporal-spatial moment. It is always in the process of becoming, and what this becoming entails is maintained by the ongoing dialogue that constitutes it.

One way this can be achieved according to Rapport (1987) is to remove the distinction between interviewer and interviewee, instead replacing it with the idea of a 'talking partners' (1987, p176) engaged in an evolving 'talking relationship of which the interview is but a moment - albeit a distinctive one.' (1987, p176). I like this suggestion, as it challenges the meta-narrative of the forensic social researcher mining their interviewees. The interviewer/interviewee dyad, inherently loaded as it is with a power imbalance, is troubled and the interviewee, when reconceived as either informant or respondent or talking partner assumes a subjectivity, importance and power. The researcher is freed from attempting to posture as the objective expert of the piece and can actually begin to listen as the most uninformed party of the conversation.

This rang true as I turned to the idea of initiating interviews with staff and students at the theatre company. Over the protracted observation period prior to pressing play on the dictaphone, I had worked hard to build rapport with the people at the theatre. I had quizzed, and been quizzed, by staff and students as we

conducted a dance of social interaction in order to discover whether our aims and expectations may be compatible. I had entered into many 'talking relationships' with individuals prior to interviews and this meant that by the time of the interview I had a sense of how I might be the most appropriate 'talking partner' for a particular individual: of who I could expect to talk to me with levity, of who would be likely to be more pragmatic and so forth. This duly allowed me to adopt different approaches to the interview situation; curating them so as to allow the person I was talking to feel at ease as possible. Additionally, this understanding of the interview as just another instance of communication between myself and respondents informed my decision to share well in advance the list of topics that I would raise in the interviews with staff and students. As Mishler notes, 'the interviewer's presence and form of involvement; how he listens, attends, encourages, interrupts, digresses, initiates topics and terminates responses is integral to a respondent's account.' (1991, p83). I felt duty bound to disclose as much as possible about the forthcoming interview prior to the actual event. I hoped that by doing so, I might remove a little of the mystique and uncertainty of the process: by allowing respondents to see what I would like to talk about, I hoped to help them feel less under the spotlight in the event of the interview itself.

## **Transcription**

How to represent the responses of the staff and students in the transcripts, became a central methodological decision during research. As Brinkman and Kvale (2018) note, 'by neglecting issues of transcription, the interview researcher's road to hell becomes paved with transcripts.' (2018 p106). Mishler (1991) creates a useful analogy to think about the process of turning the recorded spoken words of respondents into texts. Invoking the field of photography, he notes how different 'lenses, films, printing papers and darkroom practices' (1991, p13) indelibly affect the 'real' and 'true' picture that emerges. Like the photographer, the researcher is able to vastly alter the image that is presented to the audience, and so the researcher needs to be mindful of the choices that are made and how

they affect the presented work. Riessman notes that ‘transcribing discourse, like photographing reality, is an interpretative practice.’ (1993 p13). How to present the speech of another (respondent) to another (reader) is ethically fraught. Particularly in my case where I was handling the speech of individuals from a marginalised group (people with learning disabilities) that has historically either been silenced or written out of the research process. As Brinkman and Kvale (2018) note: ‘to transcribe means to transform’ (2018 p105), with a live social interaction being transmuted into an abstracted written form. I needed to be mindful not to transform the words of the respondents beyond recognition.

In the end I decided to present the speech of the respondents as I heard it in the recordings. Whilst accepting that what is presented cannot be considered a True documentation of the conversation - owing to the fact that the transcripts produced are no more than my abstracted interpretations of the words of others describing actual events during an actual event - I can attest that they are truthful renditions of what I heard. I have not ‘cleaned up’ speech. By this I mean that I did not editorially alter the oral testimony when converting them to texts. Pauses, clashes of tenses, non sequiturs, omissions, idiosyncratic speech patterns and sentence construction have all been unaltered and remain as heard.

With reference to the students in particular this was driven by a desire to document and represent their voices as faithfully as possible. I believe that much of the promising work achieved in the nascent field of disability studies has revolved around the desire to bring the previously missing voices of disabled people into research and the academy, and I hoped that this was something I could strive to attain in this thesis. I also believed that to ‘clean up’ speech would be to perpetrate my own act of ‘symbolic violence’ (Frère 2017, Bourdieu 2013) by suggesting that the way individuals spoke was not proper enough for insertion into a serious piece of academic writing. Barthes was helpful when thinking around this issue, particularly during his discussion around readerly (‘Lisible’) vs

writerly ('scriptible') texts (Barthes 1977). He argues that the former demand no special attention from the reader whilst the latter contain meaning that is not immediately evident and thus require some effort on the part of the reader. Barthes leaves us in no doubt as to which sort contains richer rewards. By recording speech as heard I have chosen to produce passages in what follows that may require the reader to read and make their own meaning of what is documented, but I believe that this is much preferred to presenting sanitised and grammatically correct speech that fails to capture any sense of the person who spoke.

Riessman (1993) perceptively notes that the process of transcription is the third of 'five levels or kinds of representation in the research process.' (1993 p8). From a phenomenological perspective, our primary experience occurs in 'the lived world of immediate everyday experience' (1993 p8). Attending to this experience, the individual begins to make editing decisions, 'reflecting, remembering, recollecting' (1993 p9) specific details of that experience and thus creates a representation of the direct experience. If cajoled to recollect this experience, the individual does so through the 'performance of a personal narrative.' (1993 p9) which is another level of abstraction, another level of representation from the experience. Narratives selectively choose particular elements from a story and are produced for particular settings and particular audiences. As Riessman notes: 'in the telling, there is an inevitable gap between the experience as lived and any communication about it' (1993 p 10). The researcher needs to be aware that what they are hearing is not True as understood and conceived in realist, objective terms, but rather partisan, subjective and reproduced by the respondent. After recording this narrative, the researcher then takes hold of the speech of the respondent and in a process fraught with danger, must try to represent the voice of the respondent in a manner that is both sympathetic and ethically aware. Again, Riessman is perceptive when she notes that - like the previous levels of representation discussed - transcription is 'incomplete, partial and selective.'

(1993 p10). In narrative work, it is at the stage of transcription that the voice of the researcher and the voice of the respondents become inexorably intertwined.

In short, my concern to settle on a mode of representation arose from my awareness that, historically, the voices of people with learning disabilities have been under-represented in academic work. Writers such as Ryan (2019), Clifford (2020), Stiker (1999) and Jarrett (2020) suggest that this was because people with learning disabilities were seen as unreliable sources of knowledge. My direct experience prior to returning to academia as both a support worker and a teaching assistant for children and young adults with learning disabilities made me aware that such lazy generalisations were wide of the mark and that people with learning disabilities can comment directly on issues affecting their lives. Rendering their words as accurately as possible thus became of ethical importance throughout this phase of the research.

## Chapter 5 - Talking about the theatre

"My building has every convenience,  
It's gonna make life easy for me.  
It's gonna be easy to get things done."

Talking Heads: *Don't Worry About the Government*

### Chapter Overview

The aim of this chapter will be to present the information I gathered during my time at the theatre company. In particular it will draw from the transcripts of the interviews conducted with staff at the theatre and the field notes I generated during the course of my observations at the company. It will be of interest to readers who would like to hear about how those involved at the theatre talk about the theatre in general and its training programs in particular. It will also include my reflections on what I heard and saw during my time onsite, and how I began to make sense of what I witnessed. This includes direct comments and longer reflections on the particular nature and qualities of the space. They are included in the hope that readers may gain a sense of the places in which the daily business of the theatre is conducted.

### Introduction

In the next two chapters readers will find extended passages of speech that have been transcribed from the interviews with staff and students. To my mind this makes them both the most exciting and important part of this work. Up until this point the only 'voice' that readers will have encountered is the authors. In this chapter, however, the 'voices' of those informants who were gracious enough to talk to me will be presented, albeit in a manner that has been edited and curated by myself (hence the quotation marks around the word 'voices').

The aim of this editing is to begin to tell *a* story rather than *the* story of theatre company. To attempt to do the latter would be a mistaken enterprise. Like the cartographers in Borges parody *On Exactitude in Science* (2001) it could only result only in a meaningless document coextensive with the theatre company it claims to depict. I am acutely aware that my prior interests and readings, around the problem of providing equitable training and learning opportunities for learning disabled people commensurate with the choices available to their non-disabled peers after leaving school, results in a particular story being told. I am equally aware that I have corralled and curated the 'voices' of the staff and students in order to tell this story. Other stories could undoubtedly have been constructed from the information the informants in this project were gracious enough to share. My hope is that the one I have chosen to 'manufacture' is meaningful and recognisable to these informants, holds interest for the general reader, and can further my assertion that learning disabled people must be able to access meaningful training and development opportunities post school as part of the larger, ongoing project of agitating to ensure learning disabled people achieve equity with the ableist majority across all aspects of their lives.

I have chosen to present both the results and analysis of my project alongside each other. Although this is ostensibly an academic work, my main desire is that it should be accessible for all readers. I worry that passively reporting results before commenting upon them in the following chapter causes an unnecessary delay for readers that could result in confusion. I do not want readers to have to flip back and forth between pages and chapters in an attempt to follow my argument. I believe a more elegant solution is simply to report conversations and events and then comment directly upon them in the hope that readers will better follow the narrative I wish to share. As stated earlier in the methodology (Chapter 3) I am a proponent of the abductive approach, which demands from the researcher a continual movement from theory to experience and from experience to theory during reportage. To quote again Atkinson's words,



fruitful analysis occurs when 'fragments of ethnographic observation are linked by textual passages of interpretation and commentary to produce a potentially plausible account.' (2020 p 72). I hope I have achieved this in the pages that follow.

These chapters will be divided into two sections. In the first, I shall use extended excerpts and vignettes in order to address my first research aim: To document and describe the processes and practices of a particular training provision for young learning disabled adults. Following this I shall rely heavily on the testimony of the young adults in order to address the second research aim: To document the experiences of young learning disabled adults as they engage with a long term training program. Interspersed throughout are a series of 'scenes', like the one that follows this overview: pieces of reflective writing that aim at providing a thick, rich description of events I witnessed during my time onsite. When combined, I hope to provide the reader with a sense of the ethos of the theatre company and the training and development provision it has developed for a wide variety of individuals, whilst also offering an insight into how students enrolled on one particular program, the three year accredited Performance Academy course describe the experience of being students at the theatre company.

### **Scene 1 - Warming Up**

It is the end of lunchtime. Having eaten well in the easy company of their peers, a small group of five learning disabled actors, a trainee learning disabled production assistant and their director make their way back to Studio 1. They do so in order to recommence rehearsals for an upcoming production that offers a satirical take on the climate emergency. I tag along behind.

To get into the studio space we pass through a sturdy set of doors that, due to their height, heft and beautiful construction, make the suggestion of being guardians of some kind of sacred space. The sense of the sublime is heightened

by the juxtaposition of the dimensions of the doors and the smooth, silent ease with which they open. Like everything in this building, they are well made and well considered: although they pull open with the slightest of touches, there is also a large button at hip height that can be pressed and causes both doors to sweep open automatically. It feels like an entrance that is at once dramatic yet accessible to all.

Once through the door, the quasi-ecclesiastical atmosphere is maintained. Passing through a short vestibule, one emerges into a cavernous space that gives both clues and remains sympathetic to the building's original incarnation as a cotton mill. One of the hundreds built in the northern town in which this research was conducted. The exposed walls, in places still smudged and chipped, speak of hard, dangerous, dirty work. A space of exploitation and hierarchy with orders and directives handed down by managers and foremen to the balers, carders, doublers and doffers who once populated this factory floor. A workplace of peril, where exploited bodies did their best to service the endless churn of the machines turning profit for their absent owners. A space set in dizzying motion by Marx's sorcerer, where 'masses of labourers, crowded into the factory, [were] organised like soldiers', in order that they could be 'daily and hourly enslaved by the machine.' (Marx p10, 2008)

But things can change. In the words of Dylan Thomas, 'Time passes. Listen. Time passes.' (Thomas p4, 1995). Where once noise and confusion held court, now silence reigns. Not only have the machines fallen silent, they have disappeared. The scars in the brickwork where the scutching, carding, spinning and yarn gassing apparatus were once attached are the only remnants of the previous incarnation of this room and they, to a large extent, are covered, almost bandaged, by the simple black drapes that fall some 60 feet from ceiling to floor, softening and obscuring past ignominies. Above, industrial rigging onto which a variety of

stage and spot lighting is bolted calls back to the prior industrial incarnation of the space.

But this equipment speaks of a different use, a different employment; one not of repetitive monotony, but rather one where even the light can be manipulated to create permutations of endless possibility. Scattered around the room is expensive technical equipment. This equipment is neither hidden, nor locked away, but is instead on display: within reach and waiting to be used. It is a professional space that divulges and transmits its trust, value and belief in the people who now work here: namely, professional and trainee learning disabled artists. The industry standard equipment conveys a conviction in the possibility and potential of those who access this space to construct, rehearse, produce and perform their art. It tells those who access this space that what they produce within this space is worthy of being captured and presented at a professional level. That this is not a space in which to play at being an artist, rather a place in which the process of becoming or being one is very much viable.

Back to our group, still collectively soporific in the post-lunch lull. People stretch and yawn and idly scroll on phones. Again, in a break from the past, no directives are issued from upon high to call time on the lunch break. No bell is sounded, nor orders barked, but slowly, and under their own impetus, the group of artists come together. In what seems to be a familiar routine (because no direction or organisation is observed) the 5 actors gather in a small circle with a half inflated football. One member of the group reminds the others of the only rule to the game by saying 'remember, you can only touch it once', before the frenetic activity begins. Arms, legs, voices and ball career around the space in reaction to intended (and unintended) reflections, deflections and touches. The aim, to best yesterday's total of 13, is not achieved, but the game has served its purpose. The somnolent, silent group that entered the space is now very much awake and alert. Laughter (a common sound in this workplace) and energy reign.

At a lull in proceedings, I momentarily think that the warm up has ended, but the actors remain in their circle, laughing, breathing heavily and deconstructing why they were not able to beat their score. At this juncture, the Artistic Director intervenes, and with minimal instruction, suggests another warm up game intended to target the voice and body. A game that requires that the actors begin to draw from their repertoire of professional skills. The group switches effortlessly to the new game, which suggests that it is also part of the post-lunch routine. It takes the form of one member of the company miming what appears to be a familiar action (e.g. looking at their wrist as if checking the time) before another member of the group sidles up, copies the action, and asks the question: 'What are you doing?'. The response from the individual performing the action is always unexpected and surreal (e.g. 'I'm giving my invisible seagull somewhere to rest.'), and kudos is given to the individual who can pair the most mundane mime, with the most florid, surreal explanation. The person asking the question, then performs their own mime, and the process is repeated.

After several rounds of this game, which brings yet more laughter, energy and joy into this working space, the group decide collectively to move onto their last warm up game. The efficiency with which it is performed by the whole group again suggests that they are well versed with its structure. It takes the form of call and response, and its theme is based around environmental issues that link with the play I have watched being rehearsed during the morning session. In practice, one actor begins with a short phrase that is paired with a particular action. The other actors then respond with a particular phrase, which itself has a particular action. Another actor then initiates a different call, which itself elicits a different response, and the game continues and gathers momentum:

*Call:* Carbon footprint!

*Response:* Eat local!

*Call:* Eat local!

*Response:* Carbon footprint!

For instance, in the above, an ostentatious action, as if stepping into a particularly malodorous puddle, is paired with the call, whilst the response is synchronised with a comedic, hammy, over exaggerated mime of taking a bite out of an apple:

*Call:* Eew! Plastic!

*Response:* Mmmm! Yummy biscuit!

*Call:* Mmmm! Yummy biscuit!

*Response:* Eew! Plastic!

Picking the imaginary plastic up from the floor, and holding the offending (imaginary) item at length, the caller initially holds their nose disdainfully before the chorus boorishly step forward, tear off the wrapper to their (imaginary biscuits) and toss them to the ground. Their action in turn attracts the attention of the caller, who, tempted by the sight of the chorus, grabs their own biscuit, devours it and thoughtlessly tosses the (imaginary) wrapper to the floor. This in turn invokes the disdain of the chorus, who stoop down to pick up the offending item, their faces now etched with a mixture of contempt and disgust.

I am reminded of the line 'Half victims. Half accomplices. Like everyone else.' from Sartre's *Dirty Hands* (1948). It is notable that the ideas contained in this piece of action are complex and contradictory, not neatly packaged and presented in a simplified black and white manner. This is important; the game feels not like a homily handed down to instruct learning disabled artists, but rather something that has been constructed collectively to address the complexities of the issue of climate change. It does not proceed from an ableist starting point that things need to be simplified and neatly packaged for learning disabled people. Rather it

assumes that they are more than capable of being invested in and commenting upon common problems that affect humanity as a whole. There is the notion, in this game, that we are all implicated, and therefore complicit, in the continuing climate emergency. That our modes of living in the early twenty-first century all contribute to the problem. We all have dirty hands, and are therefore victims of our lifestyle choices, but to the same extent we all have the ability to effect change.

The game continues apace. There seems to be a guiding set of rules here that allows for a seamless transition between the various calls and responses and also prevents any confusion as to which member of the group will take the next turn as the caller, but it is my first time observing this warm up game and I am unable to decipher them. Maybe there is a verbal or visual cue that I miss but, either way, the group works collectively to remain together and on point. A favourite:

*Call:* Methane!

*Response:* (Long farting sound)

*Call:* (Long farting sound)

*Response:* Methane!

is invoked on several occasions by different members of the group and causes much hilarity, but despite the laughter, the pace of the game is held and the circle remains unbroken. The people here are invested and focussed on their work.

I find myself drawn into the scene and want to take part. The collective skill of the group makes it seem effortless, and the call and response has a hypnotic element to it. It looks like fun. I note the energy and investment that each actor has in the game, the collective investment to ensure that it continues to work. The group are united in an endeavour that seems both challenging and engaging. Each

member of the group makes frequent eye contact with their compatriots to ensure that the piece continues apace, and the to and fro of the call and response reverberates around the room. The finale, then, when it arrives is both sudden and unexpectedly moving:

*Call:* The world is ours!

*Response:* Act now!

*Call:* Act now!

*Response:* The world is ours!

Where previous calls and responses have been explicitly concerned with environmental issues, it appears to me, the interested observer, that this particular call and response transcends the particular and appeals to the universal.

The words resonate with me, a disability studies student, as having a double meaning. Hearing a group of learning disabled artists declaim that the world is theirs is, to my ears, both provocative and thrilling; it speaks of a group of people confident of their abilities and their place within wider society. The collective resolution, to 'Act Now!', serves as a call to arms and suggests an agency to operate on the world, in their own artistic terms, that disrupts ableist conceptions of what learning disability can both mean and do.

In the 'nexus of governmentality' (Lemke 2019) that surrounds the lives of learning disabled people, 'Act Now' is often experienced as an instruction or a directive handed down by the 'bureaucratic order': submit to an assessment or risk losing your benefits, adhere to a prescribed medical regime or risk your daily liberties being removed. But not here. In this space the action of acting now is returned to the learning disabled individual. It becomes a moment of potentiality and possibility, rather than a reaction to prospective sanction. They encourage

themselves to instigate and execute action collectively and individually from the perspective of learning disability, not to satisfy the demands and expectations of the ableist majority.

It was one of the aims at the outset of this research to document the experiences of individuals with learning disabilities as they engaged with long term training and development opportunities. I had hoped to locate a space that is somehow set apart from the 'bureaucratic order' that usually swarms around learning disabled people. A space where the possibility and capability of learning disability is understood as a given. A space where learning disability is both encouraged and trusted to reflect, comment, act and operate on society at large. And here, in a rehearsal space at the edge of a northern town, it is.

### **The space of the theatre**

In this first section I will discuss the interior of the building in which the theatre company resides. In particular I will focus on the lower level of the building that contains the three studios and the communal area known to staff, artists and students as the 'Agora' (pseudonym taken from Greek and which translates as 'gathering place' or 'assembly'). I have made this choice because it is where all the training, development, rehearsal and performance I witnessed during my time onsite took place.

By starting with a description of the Agora, I hope to invite readers into the space of the theatre itself. It is a welcoming, open place for people to talk and congregate. During the course of my conversations with staff it also became apparent that it is the place where ideas regarding future work often percolate. I will share an instance of how the use of the space as a place for people to congregate and talk proved to be instrumental in the inception of a multimedia project for the theatre company.



I will then take readers into one of the multipurpose areas, Studio 1, where the daily activity of the company, the production, rehearsal and performance of artistic work is embarked upon by the staff, artists and students. When combined, I hope to give the reader a snapshot of the locations for the reader in which the daily activities of the theatre occur, and to give a sense of the permanence and professional working environment that greets Artists, students and visitors alike.

## **The Agora**

Upon arriving at the theatre company, the first space that the individual encounters is the large communal space referred to colloquially as the Agora [name anonymised]. It is accessed by either descending the eight steps from the entrance or by using the fully accessible wheelchair lift. As the name of the area suggests, the Agora is a multifunctional space where staff, students, parents, support staff, audiences and visitors congregate. I observed all kinds of interaction regularly occurring in the space: everything from break times to break out creative meetings, impromptu performances, last minute rehearsals, support sessions, tears, laughter, debate, discussion, conversation and catching up.

The Agora seems, in short, to be a befitting name, because it is experienced as an assembly area for all where all forms of expression and interaction are allowed. It is a large high ceilinged room that, like the studios it connects, is fitted out to a high standard. In the centre are six large tables completed by pea green chairs. It is around these tables that the majority of staff, artists and students would sit during the most raucous times of the day; break and lunchtimes. Along the edge of the room, set underneath the huge windows, are clusters of comfortable chairs in which smaller groups would regularly gather to relax and enjoy each other's company in the breaks between sessions. It felt like a space for and dominated by learning disability, an unusual occurrence in modern society. In the course of my conversation with the Head of Learning and Support (HLS), she stated that the aim of the company is to provide the support and conditions

for the artists and students in order 'to let them be who they are.' (line 305-306), articulating effectively the ethos of the theatre and providing a name for my work. On reflection, the Agora is experienced very much as the physical manifestation of this sentiment.

Running down one side of the room are double height windows. They look out onto a well maintained courtyard and let light into the space itself. At the far end of the room an open hatch (that doubles as a serving area staffed by artists and students during performances) reveals a spotlessly clean kitchen beyond. Like all other areas of this ground floor area, it is well equipped and accessible by all. People use the space to store and prepare their lunches or to brew up the many cups of tea and coffee that lubricate the conversations and the days at the theatre company. Off it run, gender specific, gender neutral toilets and a fully accessible toilet (over 12m square with room for a wheelchair and two carers if needed, peninsular toilets, adjustable washbasins, shower, changing bench, separate waste bins, and ceiling track hoist etc. etc.), as well as a quiet ante-room which serves as a space for any student wishing to escape the noise that often permeates and fills the space.

Overall, the Agora is a convivial welcoming space that connects seamlessly with the professional spaces in which the activities of the staff, artists and students are undertaken. It exudes a welcoming atmosphere. The space, and the condition in which it is maintained transmits to visitors both the commitment and professionalism of the theatre company towards the learning disabled artists and students who populate it.

When I (JC) asked the Associate Artist for Music (AAM) about this, he focussed his thoughts on how the layout of the building, in particular the entrance, influences the perception of the individual (AAM interview lines 163 - 191):

**AAM:** ...but like the way you walk into [name of theatre company] is, er, a thrilling experience...

**JC:** Tell me more.

**AAM:** Well, you've done it, you must have walked down the steps. So like you walk down the steps and it's like you're walking...like you've just accepted a... you're walking into the BAFTAs or something aren't you?

**JC:** That's lovely! Sashaying down those stairs!

**AAM:** But every time, I feel that every single time because everybody's attention is drawn: "Oh! Who's coming in now?" And usually you get a lovely welcome...

**JC:** You do. Tell me more about that.

**AAM:** Well it's a very, very clever building, erm, for that because you have got to walk down about eight steps - not too far - and within that eight steps you're suddenly - well if you're a bit more reticent you can turn off and go to the left towards the lockers - or if you're a little bit more whatever, social, you can go in and embrace it and get hugs or, erm, you know. But you feel like a million dollars. So, you know, that's that in itself - and even if you're a visitor there, if you're visiting there on an evening and people are already in the Agora you will feel like that too... You know, you can't see people's faces really because of the, the, you know you only get to see them as you walk down a few steps can you see exactly who's there. So there's all this, er, anticipation, you know, trepidation, you know all that: "Who's here? Who'm I gonna see?" And usually it's, it's friendly faces. The longer you stay there it's very familiar faces as well. And then within that you're then in the agora and that's where the fun happens. Where all the social things happen. That's where the noise happens, that's where the banter happens.

Employing the vernacular of the entertainment industry ('BAFTAs' 'million dollars') the AAM suggests that the experience of walking down the 'eight steps' is

akin to entering an awards ceremony. That this is a space that is exciting to enter and inhabit. The suggestion implied is that either by being the momentary focus of attention, or by being already installed in the building and witnessing new arrivals ('Who's here? Who'm I gonna see?'), the individual is the winner. The building is described as 'clever' in that it affords simultaneously either a grand or subtle entrance depending on the mood of the individual. Once at the bottom of the stairs, the AAM also picked up this equalising effect that the Agora has on those who inhabit it (AAM lines 219-223):

"Because it's just a different area, and as soon as I walk through that door I can still have that, the, the, facilitators hat on, but you know, those rules [that apply in the studio] don't really apply. So if people wanna banter or ignore me they can do that. And if they wanna come and chat to me they can do that.

This speaks back to what I noted above about the sense of the Agora being a place where the learning disabled actors and students dictate the rules of social engagement. Whereas in training sessions, the Artists and students might initially be directed by the facilitators, in the Agora the arbiters of engagement are the Artists and students themselves. They can choose to engage, or to remain silent. Either way, they are given autonomy to decide.

### **The Agora and the Contact Zone**

The results of this organisational decision to provide a space at the heart of the building for learning disabled artists and students to relax and congregate, can seemingly sometimes be extraordinary. During my conversation with the Artistic Director (AD) she revealed that conversations in the space can sometimes have a dramatic effect on the direction of the theatre company as a whole. When talking about the genesis of a large multimedia project (AD lines 115-131) the

theatre company had produced and toured, she shared that the idea had come from a conversation between staff and artists in the Agora:

**AD:** And this one seed of an idea come from, er, one of our artists whose sister also has a learning disability, having a child, a baby, a premature baby, and then because... Have you heard of this story?

**JC:** No, not at all.

**AD:** So, OK, so that actor in [name of company] she was involved in a family planning assessment meeting, whatever, let's call it, and so and then - 'cos like you know in [name of theatre] we chat and we talk to find out stories about each other and see what catches, it's organic like that - and so we found out what is assessment? What do you mean? And then she then told me it is the social worker assessing the... yeah when... basically it's when they're deciding if the mum can keep the baby through the assessment.

**JC:** And I imagine that was a terrifying experience for her...

**AD:** Yeah and she was looking after a premature baby as well! It is such a big hurdle to get through. It's so... it's almost like setting people up to fail.

The fact that the theatre not only provides a space, at the heart of the building, for different people to congregate but is also infused with an ethos where people feel able to 'chat' and 'find out stories about each other' suggests a democratic environment. In so many public and professional spaces, learning disabled people are expected on the whole to listen not talk, or to be silent altogether. When they are encouraged to speak it is often so that professional bodies and government agencies can, through the Foucauldian technologies of observation and examination, enact instances of governmentality upon them. Different rules are in place at the theatre where deep listening takes place: listening not merely to confirm what is thought to be already known, but to understand and learn more about individuals and the different experiences they

encounter in their daily lives. The effect of this deep listening is evident in the next excerpt. Later in the interview (AD lines 134-150) the AD continues:

"I just think it is very unfair...just rather than supporting it feels like it is setting people up to fail. And so then this inequality is in there. Well nobody is coming to assess me whether I'm qualified [to be a mother]. Yes so from that first shock and initial feeling of: "That's not right!". And then we chat, and research more, and discussion amongst the artist group themselves... and...we realised we are so ignorant about what is actually happening out there... I mean about, like, people being parents... like what actually are the stories, because we heard one story and then it was, like, phenomenal! The things she's gone through and then so poignant as well. And then the artists themselves - it is a natural course of life, like, having relationships, getting married, thinking about children, forming family, or not - so we just feel it's a story that is really close to us. At that time I was thinking about exactly the same question: "Am I prepared to be a mother? Am I good enough to be a mother?" So that it was personal to me as well as a non-disabled woman. I totally resonated... and then what if somebody assesses me? Gosh! If you ask me all those questions it'd 100% put me off!"

The conversation that started in the Agora, about the right of a learning disabled mother to nurture and raise a child, and the incursion of governmental agencies (in this case a social worker) who hold the power of judgement over this right, caused the AD to reflect deeply on how she would handle this level of scrutiny. She notes that 'nobody is coming to assess' her and, moreover, if she were to be exposed to the same level of questions it would deter her from thinking about starting a family ('it'd 100% put me off'). Out of this disparity was born the impetus to produce a multimedia piece of work (AD lines 104-107):

"a forum theatre project called [name of piece], a studio touring theatre piece called [name of piece], and the large-scale outdoor is called [name of piece]. On top of that, erm, we've got a publication which is a photobook of, erm, parents' stories called [name of piece]."

that brought attention to a variety of audiences the conditions faced by prospective learning disabled mothers and fathers.

This excerpt can also be understood with reference to the idea of the Contact Zone. As readers may remember, Contact Zones 'are often the result of invasion and violence' (such as ableist society decreeing the conditions in which learning disabled women can become mothers) that result in 'social formations based on drastic inequalities' (Pratt 1996 p5) such as the one identified by the AD around her rights as a 'non-disabled woman' to become a mother when compared with the story received from the actor.

It is also evident that the dual processes of resistance, Transculturation and Autoethnography, are at work in this recollection. Transculturation, the process whereby members of 'subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant culture' (Pratt 1991 p36) could reasonably be invoked to describe the manner in which the judgements, processes and protocols of the medical and social work professions became the basis for several artistic works, duly transforming an act of governmentality into a collective artistic response. The meaning of both the assessment and the practice of enforcing it irrevocably changed from an act of ableist domination to a prolonged artistic collective resistance.

Similarly, Autoethnography, the process through which "people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have

made of them." (Pratt 1991 p35) can be seen in the 'forum theatre project', 'studio touring theatre', 'large scale outdoor' and 'photobook' that answered the judgement passed on the sister of the actor. They are commensurate with Richardson and Bensted's (2017) rebuttal of the *Improving Lives* (2016) green paper referenced in the literature review (Chapter 1). As a whole the works could be seen to constitute, in Foucauldian terms, an act of collective parrhêsia. Foucault describes Parrhêsia as the courageous act of speaking out against power. Courage he would argue here is needed because of the historical jeopardy inherent whenever learning disability speaks out or back to the medical profession. Let us never forget that it was the sages of the medical profession who created the institutions into which generations of learning disabled people were incarcerated (Foucault 1991, Stiker 1999). Places of fear and panoptic surveillance where learning disabled people were routinely objectified and exposed to the latest medical experiments (lobotomy, ECT, benzodiazepine 'therapy', sterilisation) in a barbarously misguided project to somehow bring them closer to medical normalcy.

But here, within the confines of the theatre, shielded to some extent from the reach of the 'bureaucratic order', the theatre makers found the capacity to instigate and develop creative works that created 'a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth' (Foucault 1980 p193). As Foucault notes, one 'fiction' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth.' (1980 p193). In this excerpt it would appear that, after listening to the experience of the learning disabled actor in the inclusionary environment of the Agora, the theatre company as an organisation was driven and inspired to produce works of art that 'engenders or 'manufactures' something that does not as yet exist' (Foucault 1980 p193) - in this case an improvement of the experience of prospective learning disabled mothers when interacting with the medical profession.



## **Inside Studio 1**

Set around the edges of the Agora are doors to the three studios in which the work of the theatre occurs. They are also used for the delivery of the wide range of training courses offered by the theatre company to a wide variety of participants.

The doors are sturdy and beautifully made, but they are also power assisted and open effortlessly at the touch of a button. They wish to be walked or wheeled through, and invite the individual to do so in their own way. Passing through them, the Studio spaces reveal themselves to be large multipurpose spaces where a multitude of activities (devising, developing, rehearsal and performances) occur. Immediately on the left is a bank of retractable seating that can be employed during performances to accommodate audiences. This is one of the features that speaks of the multifunctional nature of the studio spaces. All can be reconfigured to match the needs of the various groups working within them (such as the Drumming Lesson that will be shared below) Looking around Studio 1, it quickly becomes apparent that the space is fitted out with technical equipment befitting of a professional theatre. No expense seems to have been spared to fit out this room (or indeed any of the other two spaces that are fitted out to the same degree). Taken as a whole, the impression they give to the observer are of a set of permanent, professional, spaces that have been constructed specifically to allow learning disabled artists and students to embark upon their various creative endeavours.

## **Thoughts on the building**

Across the course of the conversations with staff it became clear that the very fabric of the building is a source of obvious pride: indeed it seems an injustice to refer to it as being merely bricks and mortar. The descriptions offered by staff portray it as being somehow more than that and transmit a sense that the building itself is almost an actor in the activities that are contained within its walls. In what

follows I will share extracts that illustrate this high regard. A good place to start came from the comments of the Head of Learning and Support (HLS). Reflecting on how the theatre company and the space seemed to be a good fit, they noted (HLS lines 469-472):

"It's just our building. Obviously from the outside, you wouldn't think of all this space and all these beautiful studios, but yeah it wouldn't work in another space. It has to be here, like this is the home of [name of theatre company]."

The 'has to be here' speaks of the way that the space and the theatre company seem to marry together in order to produce a place where learning disabled Artists and Students can congregate, collaborate and produce artistic work. It is also important to note the use of the word 'home', a word often linked with ideas of support and security, because as will be seen later on several of the students chose to describe the theatre company with reference to 'home' and 'family'.

The comments offered by the Creative Engagement Producer (CEP) offer another insight into how the building is viewed by those who access it (CEP lines 521-523):

"I quite often, when I show people round or talk about it, I say it is an aspirational space to work in. Just because of the height and space and the way it's set up."

Imrie (1998, 2001) reflects on the negative effect the built environment often imposes onto disabled people, but in this space the converse occurs. This sentiment of a well equipped, professional space where aspirations can be achieved was also referenced by the the Associate Artist in Theatre and

Engagement (AATE) as she remembered the day of her interview (AATE lines 104-120):

**AATE:** I was simply nervous because I realised that I really wanted it. I came to the building and there's something about this building that really sort of sets it... sort of, off what this company's trying to do.

**JC:** Tell me more. What do you mean by that?

**AATE:** Well it's just, just the investment isn't it? You're invested in a building to build a place that makes change. It's not a community hall, it's not at the back of someone else's building. It's not a building that you have to leave at the end of the day. It's a building that's purposely built... and it's designed to, for, this purpose.

**JC:** And that's unusual.

**AATE:** Yes, yes. And it's a really... it's rare isn't it? Yeah, it's not a theatre. It's a space for learning and development. And obviously we put on stuff. Performances and stuff. But it is a place, you know, where stuff can happen.

The AATE contrasts the facilities of the theatre company ('investment') with the underfunded, ill-equipped, transitory spaces in which learning disabled groups are often forced to meet ('It's not a community hall', 'It's not a building that you have to leave at the end of the day.'). It is also notable to the AATE that it is 'not at the back of someone else's building' i.e hidden away like a dark secret, but rather is a space 'purposely built' for the learning disabled artists and students who congregate there. The permanence of the place making not just a base, but a place 'where stuff can happen'.

### **Working at the theatre company**

Throughout the conversations held with staff, what came across was the level of job satisfaction that employees felt. Examples are given below:

"You can't help but be positive at {name of theatre}. It's an incredible place to, just, just to keep moving forward, keep moving forward." (AAM lines 597-599)

"I think it's the nature of the work we do. The people we work with, erm and it's kind of like... you know when I speak about my job to like my friends, or like my family or anything like that, I talk about my job, like so passionately, I love it. It's not something, you know, it's not a nine to five Monday to Friday... I'm not dragging myself out of bed. I'm looking forward to coming to work everyday. Everyday is different, and I don't, like, that's, that's unique. That's not... not, not everybody can say that they love their job." (HLS lines 212-221)

"Erm, and then some of it is just... it's that - Aah! It's really hard to describe!... I feel like if... if you're *in*... in this company... you're *in*. And you're wholeheartedly *in*, and you're working till seven, eight O'clock, which is bad, a bad way of expressing.... But if you want something to happen then everyone's there. And you know: "What do you need me to do? What are we gonna do to make this happen? Can I have this? Can I borrow that?" (AATE lines 174 - 180)

This satisfaction with working at the theatre is corroborated by disclosures from many of the staff of the length of time they have worked at the company. Of the 10 staff interviewed, only two had been there for less than 5 years. The length of service of the other 8 interviewees ranged between 8 and 25. Given that job roles supporting and working with people with learning disability often remain unfilled, or are subject to a near continuous churn of employees, this suggests that the staff at the theatre are working in a conducive, engaging environment. In the next section I shall look at this a little closer.

## **Descriptions of the theatre company**

In this section, my intention is (pun intended) to set the stage by sharing how the staff talk about the theatre company. I believe the quotes used are both interesting and illustrative as they highlight a duality that is at the very heart of the company's conversations with itself. In short, it appeared that the people involved in running, maintaining and reproducing the company are in a constant dialogue regarding the company's purpose. This was something that I raised during the conversation with the Executive Director (ED lines 332-345):

**JC:** So what would you describe [name of theatre company] being as it stands? Because there's a real social, communal element to it as well as the professional theatre.

**ED:** It's a good question. I think I still, still base the core of my decision making in us as a producing company. I still think... and... the body of work that we...we've always produced a sort of... we've always done work for different places and spaces. We've never... we don't just do things for theatre spaces, or just do things for festivals, or just do things outdoors. We've always had a broad church that's... we've always done a kind of combination of things. Erm, I, I still think we're rooted in that... we're an arts led theatre stroke performance maker. But, and, as part of that we have a particular concern for people with learning disabilities. So within that structure I think we do have a strong development agency kind of strand to the work.

This duality is corroborated during my conversation with the Creative Engagement Producer (CEP lines 366-379):

"We're interested in how we connect with our community, how we use this building, how we make meaningful moments with people. For me it's how it's reciprocal. It's not: "Oh! Come and see a show. Oh! Come and meet this target." It's not about that and I think the

more time has gone on the more [name of company] has become, er, better at not seeing things like community engagement and the work, the core business, as separate. They, they feed into each other, so the looking after people, the, you know, social side of it, the benefits to people. You know we try to provide food with everything, you know the whole idea that we're all looking at about warm spaces... the team we're working together as, what's in our mind is about looking after people, about providing something of value, of benefit. Erm, and exploring how..., I suppose, how inclusion... 'cos we try to work, there's an inclusive approach to everything so... we are a team that is inclusive."

There is a push and pull between the desire to continue to produce professional theatre that can tour nationally and internationally, but also to serve the needs of the local community and individuals who access the training on offer at the theatre. This is not a conventional business model looking to extract profit at all costs, but rather an attempt to maintain a going concern that can attract funding both to service the ongoing needs of the Artists producing work within its walls, and also attract funding that can facilitate other opportunities that support training opportunities and community engagement. In short, we see evidence of an 'alternative workspace' as described and understood by Hall and Wilton (2011, 2015) As the Associate Artist for Theatre noted (AATE lines 151-155):

"I just think it's, it's a really special environment. Where people - I just think the language... and the language we work alongside people with learning disabilities. And I think that is so true within the environment that we work alongside... making sure that we're using the stage as a space almost to, erm, allow people to tell their story."

This notion of developing talent (either staff, artists or students) was also identified by the Artistic Director at the theatre who noted (AD lines 84-95):

"It's a very nurturing company that develops people. There's a company culture that really thinks about how do we develop somebody, and taking everybody from where their starting point is and think about where their journey they make, rather than this is the standard that everyone needs to hit regardless of where they are. It's thinking about the journey that individuals make, so that's why it's a very wide...it's like multi...It becomes a lot of different types of courses, different types of art promoted, disciplinary, different scale, different stories and topics, issues, that we tackle, erm because of the variety of people we have here which makes it more exciting. It's a harder job, and it's a harder narrative to tell people, a harder brand for people to understand, because there's a lot of nuance to what this company is."

She suggests in the excerpt above that the desire to accommodate individuals within the theatre company has been behind the diversification of opportunities offered to individuals. This is corroborated by the four differentiated courses (*Academy*, one day, *Completely Theatre* and *Completely Arts*) that I became aware of during my time onsite. Rather than diluting the essence of the company, however, she suggests that this willingness to accommodate is a defining feature of the theatre company. This again suggests an alternative workplace (Hall and Wilton 2011, 2015), where the work, to varying extents, is made to fit the worker rather than the worker being expected to fit the work. It speaks of the 'personalised, flexible approach' to training provision that Roulstone et al (2014) identified as increasing the chances of long term engagement and success for learning disabled students upon any given training provision. It also feeds into Beyer's recommendation (2020 online) for employers around 'spending time understanding people's job interests, what they are good at, and the work types and environments they need.' This may make the theatre 'a harder brand for people to understand' but, for the theatre, this is preferable to

the alternative of not providing as wide a range of training opportunities to the widest range of prospective attendees.



## **Chapter 6 - Processes and Practices at the theatre**

### **Chapter overview**

This chapter will be of interest to readers who wish to know how the theatre goes about its daily business. By describing the processes and practices in play I hope to describe how the ethos of the theatre produces a particular atmosphere in which students, artists and staff appear to thrive.

### **The importance of collaboration**

Through talking to staff, it became apparent that an important way in which the theatre company functions in both the short and long term is through collaboration. On any given day collaboration is happening across the building in a multitude of guises. The daily acts of collaboration point at two things which will be developed in this section.

Firstly, this is a workplace shorn of the competitive self interest that infuses the atomised neoliberal workplace. Instead, the workplace of the theatre company can be thought of as an 'alternative workplace' (Hall & Wilton 2011, 2015). A space built instead on mutuality and interdependence, which paradoxically functions to encourage the learning disabled artists and students who access the site to begin to make autonomous decisions about their art and careers. A place where people feel able to share their strengths (and freely admit their limitations) in order that they can collectively support each other to ensure that the company thrives.

Secondly, by inviting the learning disabled artists and students to be part of this collaboration, as equal partners, the theatre company reveals itself to be a space that believes deeply in the possibility of learning disabled people. Nowhere is this more explicit than in the discussions around the role of the Co-Facilitator that has been created to bring the learning disabled artists and students closer to

the day to day decisions involved in running the theatre and setting future direction. In what follows, I shall draw on extracts taken from the conversations with staff in order to illustrate the extent to which this occurs.

In the oblique parlance of corporate-speak it became apparent that people do not stay within their respective 'silos', but actively share and learn from one another. The Associate Artist in Theatre and Engagement notes (AATE 280-290):

"It's like having those conversations at break times and lunch times and even between... sort of the tutors, the staff and the Artists. And you go: "Well this is interesting. Oh! I wanna know about that. Can I come and see what you're doing? If you have an idea or if you wanna bounce that idea off me let's have a chat about it." All that other stuff that happens. The in-between that really pushes stuff as well. "I really wanna do this but I don't know how to do it." "Oh well I did something somewhere else. And it worked really well when I did this." "Oh great! Can you tell me more about it so that I can see what I can steal and use here." And the experience and knowledge and what may have worked, or what may have failed..."

She describes a collaborative workplace where tutors, staff and artists feel able to 'chat' about the best way to execute ongoing projects and to learn from each other. An open environment where ideas cross pollinate. This is corroborated by the Associate Artist for Music who notes (AAM lines 421-428):

"I'm almost forced to experiment all the time. "What are you gonna do now?" And, and you're inspired by what other people are doing. Last year was a classic example. [name removed] bought that ladder in with all the leads on it for one of her plays. And it's just like that's awe and wonder right there. Brilliant. Thanks for that. And even if that doesn't directly inspire me to do what I'm doing, it certainly filled me with awe and wonder and it's just like saying

there are new possibilities for me there. You can't act on all the inspiration that you get, but the fact is it's just *there*."

There is the suggestion in the above excerpt that this is a place almost that is almost replete with *too many ideas* regarding how to work alongside learning disabled people ('can't act on all the inspiration') which, given the dearth of opportunities offered in ableist society for learning disabled people, marks this project as noteworthy. One cannot but wonder what a network of businesses and organisations permeated with a similar *modus operandi* could mean for learning disabled people at both a local and national level.

On a day to day basis, the Learning and Participation Coordinator (LPC), offers an insight into how the collaborative nature of the company is maintained when talking about the many roles she had occupied during her time at the company (LPC 144-147):

"That's what you do at [name of theatre company] - you wear many different hats, you never necessarily just do your own job role, you have many other hats and things like that... most people don't just do their own job role. It's kind of everybody does a bit of everything."

This is interesting in itself. Usually in the neo-liberal workplace job roles are strictly delineated, often in clear hierarchical patterns, and often jealously guarded. At the theatre, though, the LPC seems to suggest that these rules are redundant ('most people don't just do their own job role') and that the staff are trusted to work in ways that benefit the organisation. The AAM suggests that this desire to work collaboratively and non hierarchically emanates from the top of the organisation (AAM interview lines 232-251):

"Cos it's like... there are people with job titles but... there's no... everybody's as important as everybody else. Obviously you've got [names chief executive] at the top who can just deal with *anything* if it comes to it. And become that powerful leader if she needs to be. But in general it's, it's understanding the strengths she's got beneath her and other people being able to support in different ways. But, you know, when you've got the marketing person who's suddenly giving out instructions because something's not happening right, you don't expect that from other places. You know you expect the marketing person to be on the side, but no they're integral to what's going on. And, erm, you know you see personalities before job titles as well...So the people's roles are very, very interesting and that just commands respect because you feel there is a responsibility with respect. You know, if you have responsibility and you, you do your bit. I keep my corner of [name of theatre] right. But also I can be called on by anybody to be asked my opinion on this or that or whatever. And it's like that's absolutely fine."

The reference to 'personalities before job titles' transmits a sense of comradeship at the theatre: a process that seems to inculcate a sense of shared responsibility for its success ('you do your bit. I keep my corner right'). The AAM describes an organisation that works hard to include all workers in its daily operations and future plans. Reflecting on this herself, the Executive Director notes (ED interview lines 7-17):

"Erm, and so I... I suppose I - the way I try to conduct myself in my role here at [name of theatre] - is to, erm, kind of a bit of herding! And a bit of corralling! Erm, you know I wanna create lots of space for... you know good ideas can come from anywhere. So it's how to create the conditions where people feel able and willing and motivated to kind of step into that space. At the same time we're

not a Co-operative or a collective. We're a company that has a set of stakeholders... Arts Council, Local Authority and other... investors. And so it's trying to constantly get the balance I suppose between harnessing good creative ideas and ambitions and people's goals, and how... we align and match that with... stakeholder expectations."

She reveals here the ongoing task of creating 'lots of space' into which 'good creative ideas and ambitions' can percolate whilst remaining within the parameters set by 'stakeholders'. I suggest that this excerpt should be understood through reference to Titchkosky's question of 'what would it mean to think disability out from the bureaucratic order that it is bounded by today.' (2020 p207). The Executive Director pragmatically sets out the path that the company navigates in order to do this. On the one hand the 'bureaucratic order' ("Arts Council, Local Authority and other... investors') has to have their 'expectations' met in order that they can be induced to continue to provide grants that facilitate the continued existence of the company. This is, in Foucauldian terms, how the company experiences the 'nexus of governmentality' (Lemke 2019) that is driven by the political whims of the administration of the day.

Importantly, however, set against this is the company's resolve to 'create lots of space' for people's 'ideas and ambitions' to develop and grow. This suggests a creative space outside the 'bureaucratic order'. A place where the ideas of students, artists and staff can percolate without having to concern themselves with the conditionality often imposed by the 'bureaucratic order'. It is the experience of this 'space' that the staff, Artists and students are able to fill with their collective and individual 'creative ideas'.

## **The Co-Facilitators**

The interviews revealed that collaboration does not simply occur between members of staff. Indeed, I watched staff, artists and students collaborating on

every occasion that I was at the theatre. This general collaboration is necessarily a function of the process of creating and developing the artistic work that is being constantly developed within the space. However, as this section will detail, the theatre company has created Co-Facilitator roles that invoke a particular type of collaboration that I suggest reveals much of the operating principles that underpin the company. These roles involve learning disabled artists being employed in paid roles to deliver training and skills sessions to groups visiting the site, as well as involving individuals in the day to day running of the company. In this dual role, people with learning disabilities and their non-disabled peers meet as equals, bringing their own skills in order to combine them and produce something greater than the sum of its parts. Co-Facilitator roles, as conceived within the theatre, are both aspirational and inclusionary. Students and artists see the merit of being assigned a role that brings them closer to the heart of the daily workings of the theatre company, whilst the theatre company staff describe a double benefit from the ongoing promotion of the Co-Facilitator role. The company as a whole benefit by having learning disabled Co-Facilitators infiltrate and inform the daily practices of the theatre, whilst the Co-Facilitators are encouraged to develop extra skills and abilities by working alongside their non-disabled peers.

Signs of institutional conviction in the potentiality and possibility of learning disability are exhibited in the efforts of the theatre company to involve artists and students in both the decision making and daily practice of the company. When speaking to the staff, many made reference to the process of co-facilitation, and the role of Co-Facilitator that several of the Artists have been encouraged to try out. The impetus for this seems pragmatic: to equip artists and students with a range of skills that will ready them for the vagaries of working within the creative sector: The Associate Artist in Theatre and Engagement notes (AATE lines 10-26):

**AATE:** I'm really interested in the way that people come into the company, and then they're sort of, you know - introductory level - coming in and engaging them and exploring the arts with them and then seeing where that might go. And I'm also really interested in, in, erm the Artists, erm, and where they might go with the information they have and the experience they have. And what is expected for them, and what we've, erm, sort of developed with them has been down a particular Artist route - erm performance skills - and we're demanding more of them and raising aspirations within the group.

**JC:** In what way?

**AATE:** Them... working for other places, the main one, for example. So not to just assume that they will work at [name of theatre company] for the entire of their career. That they have enough skills... and should be included in the rest of the arts world I suppose.

This stated mission within the company of 'raising aspirations' for the learning disabled artists and students who access the theatre shows that the theatre is not simply delivering training to these groups, but is also encouraging the attendees not to settle for less but more. To realise that they have the possibility to be 'included in the rest of the arts world' both individually and collectively. The Partner Programme Lead and Access Champion (PPLAC) talks of the 'possibility' that Co-Facilitation can foster (PPLAC lines 280-288):

"And I think that's what's changed is that it - rather than it, them, just being performers - there is a sense that we've got people who could be Co-Facilitators, erm, and looking at projects that aren't just theatre based. Like [name of Artist and name of their project]. And so I think there's just much more possibility. So there's more role modelling going on as well for people who, er, might be outside looking in, or who are inside looking in - say the [name of training

course]. So I think that's really exciting. Erm, and just... well I think it's just testament to the listening that's going on."

She identifies the Co-Facilitators role as something concrete that other attendees (such as the students enrolled on the training course) can view as another way to develop and grow.

My personal experience of Co-Facilitation in action was observing the Associate Artist in Music deliver a session to a group of learning disabled students who were visiting the theatre on one of its open days. My reaction and recollection of it form the next scene, to be found at the end of this section. Co-facilitating the session was one of the Artists, Jackson. Of this experience the AAM notes (AAM lines 296-303):

"But what we've got from Jackson is the fact that because he can do anything naturally he can - so he's great at doing, erm..., er..., things with drums and with singing, erm, and that's pretty much enough really to go out. So now, rather than trying to get him to do my job for four hours, it's like: "Can he... have we got five things that he could do and run independently?" So obviously you've got your warm up, singing a song or something like that, maybe learning a two part chant, doing some drumming, maybe doing some percussion."

## **Scene 2: The Drumming Lesson**

Walking into Studio 1, in the calm before the forthcoming drumming storm, I quickly count seventeen floor drums, one Cajon and one Bodhran arranged in a circle. Still encased in their covers, which have an assortment of vibrant geometric patterns upon them, and juxtaposed against the minimalist, yet surprisingly comfortable, chairs and long black scene curtains that edge the room, the effect is of an art installation. This sense is heightened by the large dimensions of the



room, with its stripped back walls and exposed electrical conduits that speak back to the building's previous industrial incarnation. But, as I will describe, industry and craft have not died out in this space. The hard work and output remain, albeit in a markedly different form.

I position myself in the corner just in time to watch a visiting group of people, here to participate in a taster session, enter the room. There is much in this cavernous, flexible space for them to take in. Opposite the drumming circle is a bank of retractable seating that can be drawn out to form the auditorium when the theatre company is performing work on site, and neatly pushed back when rehearsals are taking place. Above is the lighting rig: truss bars replete with a multitude of spot, strip, cyc, parcan and scoop lights. I notice the chatter of the group falter as they enter further into the room, and they seem hushed and unsure for a moment. Collectively they seem to ask themselves: "Is this for us? Should we be here?".

This uncertainty is shattered by the arrival of the people leading the session, Jackson and the Associate Artist for Music (AAM), who are both part of the theatre staff. Jackson is one of the full-time artists engaged by the theatre to devise, develop and perform in the productions that form the ongoing body of work of the theatre company. As part of his ongoing professional development, he has expressed an interest in helping to facilitate and deliver creative workshops to outside groups such as today's visitors. His partner, the AAM is the music teacher at the organisation who works with the academy students as well as the artists. There is nothing *louche* about the AAM, who I have previously observed doing everything (talking, smoking, walking, gesticulating) at speed. Not quite an archetypal ball of energy, but not far off.

Moving into the centre of the drumming circle, AAM quickly addresses the group while Jackson exhorts the group to 'sit down, sit down... wherever you

want.' People dutifully do so, and sit quietly waiting for further instruction. This comes in the form of AAM telling people to 'take the covers off your drums.' He stops in front of one individual who is struggling with a zip and helps them to take it out. 'Don't worry about the covers.' he says, addressing the group as a whole. 'Fling them over your shoulder, it doesn't matter where' he adds, whilst taking the now removed cover from the person he was helping, looking them in the eye and launching the cover high over their heads into the space beyond the circle. This elicits a laugh from the group and several choose to follow his lead, the fabric covers skidding and sliding over the wooden floor to various corners of the room. The reverent mood of the group is quickly becoming irreverent.

Jackson and AAM position themselves in the middle of the drumming circle on two chairs that are side by side, but at a 180 degree angle to each other, Jackson facing towards one half, and AAM towards the other half of the group. Settling into position, Jackson remarks that 'we're like strangers on a park bench!' This initiates an improvisation in which they pretend to be exactly that, passing the time of day, before eventually swinging the topic around to the task facing the group. In essence, this will be to work as two teams (A and B) to create and integrate two distinct rhythms.

Under the guise of two strangers discussing, *sotto voce*, a third party, Jackson and AAM begin an unintelligible, yet understandable conversation. Adopting a nasal, comic mumble, augmented with ostentatious gesticulations, they outline how the session will proceed. Discussing team A's starting point, for instance, AAM hooks a thumb at their side of the room and says conspiratorially;

"And see these people over here, nn 'ey 'n 'um in, 'n we'll 'arry 'nn!"  
[and they can come in and we'll carry on].

Jackson nods in agreement as the visiting group laughs at the skit that is being improvised before their eyes. Their laughter seems to inspire Jackson and AAM to continue their schtick, which becomes evermore absurd:

"Nn we'll 'oo 'at, 'nn 'en you 'oo 'is." [And we'll do that, then you do this.]

replies Jackson, demonstrating one more time the drum patterns that are to be played first alone and then by the two groups together. Suddenly, the AAM breaks from character, no longer a person on a park bench. 'Got that?', he asks the group. And what is notable is that they have. People from both sides of the circle raise their hands and relay exactly what the aim of the session is and what is necessary from both teams for the session to work.

A warm up precedes the session itself, with Jackson and AAM talking the group through a series of stretches designed to engage the upper body, before AAM reminds the group one more time of the form of the piece. Pointing to team A he says, 'So you're gonna start with your drumming, we'll join in, you drop out, leave us to do our bit, you join in.' During this recap several individuals, now engaged with the upcoming task, begin to experiment with their own rhythms. To bring them back to task in hand, AAM adds, 'If you're feeling like you haven't quite got everything out of your system yet, get your shoulders, get your arms into the drums.' This open invitation of carte blanche is received eagerly by most of the group. A tumultuous explosion of noise fills the room; syncopated, polyrhythmic and joyful as individuals feel free to express themselves.

Jackson and AAM do not call time on this, instead waiting for tired limbs to draw this period of free expression to a natural conclusion. Addressing team A, Jackson then checks if they are ready, and begins:

## **DA,DA,BA... DA,DA,BA!**

Onomatopoeia replaces numbers as an aid to keep time and to represent the quavers and crotchet that constitute this rhythm. Jackson and AAM call out the phrase like a mantra as team A attempts to fall into step with the drum pattern. Some manage to, some struggle, and some are still interested in finding their own beat, but Jackson and AAM accommodate this rather than insisting on uniformity.

Calling team A to a halt, AAM then turns to team B and asks them to rehearse their drum part. Checking they are comfortable, he begins:

## **BA,BA,BA...DA,DA,DA,DA,DA!**

Once again, onomatopoeia replaces counting in order to represent the crotchets and semi-quavers that constitute this drum pattern. Again, some individuals immediately fall into sync with the drumming and vocal prompts, whilst others struggle, especially with the hand speed required to execute the second section of the piece. But the majority continue to keep the piece coherent, whilst Jackson and AAM make eye contact with those still working the pattern out, using their actions and voices to transmit the pattern and tempo.

Calling a halt to proceedings, the pair momentarily, and effortlessly, return to their park bench personas. 'What d'ya think?' asks AAM. 'Not bad, not bad,' Jackson replies, 'This is going to be good...'

### **Co-Facilitation and cooperation at the theatre**

The above scene is just one remembered instance of the multiple instances of co-operation that I witnessed at the theatre: daily acts of collaboration between ability and learning disability that appeared so unforced and natural as to appear

mundane. But as Atkinson (2006) reminds us, anything that appears to be done with ease usually involves much thought, action and reflection. Throughout the conversations with the staff this became readily apparent; in particular what came across was a reluctance to consider that the theatre was a finished, perfect project. As the excerpts below illustrate, there is a restlessness inside the theatre that is continually searching to make the experience of the learning disabled people that access it. As a company with a longstanding international and national reputation it might be easy to sit back and bask in the admiration of the wider artistic community, but the reflexivity and insistence of facilitating creative experiences for a wide range of learning disabled artists, students and people who regularly attend and fill the space prevents this happening.

Several of the staff made reference to the importance of involving people with learning disabilities in both the future plans and delivery of current events at the theatre. Speaking directly of the working relationship between the AAM and Jackson described above, the Learning and Participation Coordinator (LPC), described the role of the Co-Facilitator (LPC lines 61-85):

**LPC:** But then we really noticed that the, that people were really interested in it and then we were able to open the opportunity to people to be Co-Facilitators with a supported work placement.

**JC:** Yeah, yeah I've heard a little about those - can you give me a specific example?

**LPC:** Yeah, of course. So Jackson, who is one of our wonderful artists who has been with the company for many a year, erm, is a wonderful musician, has worked with the one day music course now for 2 years. Erm, so Jackson - not only does he work with his, on his facilitation - but then he's also able to work with another artist, [Name of AAM], to share knowledge. But also, I think it really highlighted how successful it was for me last year in our one day

showcase. Jackson had wrote a reggae song with one day music and all of one day were able to perform that live. And, erm, and Jackson was able to accompany on keyboard or djembe for the showcase, but was never drawing attention away from the guys. They, they had the key role and he's there to impart his wisdom but also just be there to support or... yeah there's such a lovely... idea... it's exactly what [name of theatre] wants. Really we all want to do ourselves out of a job! (Laughs) You know, by encouraging our... by working with people to support them to... whatever support they need to be able to be successful in the job they, they aspire to. And that's not saying - you know Jackson still wants to be with his half artists hat on and make his own shows - but he knows that on a Friday he's got his day where he's a facilitator. And that's just... there's certain things within that week that means he's, you know, got to do some planning, or he's just got to catch up with [name of AAM].

The telling phrase for me here is the labelling of the AAM as 'another artist'. Equal billing is given to the status of Jackson and the AAM. No hierarchical distinction is made, or differentiation of role. In the LPC's telling, two artists of equal standing Co-Facilitate sessions that result in the students on the one day music course being able to present a reggae song to the audience gathered for the annual showcase. Indeed, if anything, the AAM is relegated in this retelling into a peripheral character. We are told that the song, an original composition, was one written by Jackson. In a lovely inversion of ableist expectations of learning disability, Jackson is revealed as the primary facilitator of the event. In my recollection of the Co-Facilitation session reported in the above scene, I would like to draw the reader's attention to the fact that it is the AAM, who defers to Jackson. It is they who ask Jackson 'What do you think?', which places Jackson as the ultimate arbiter of what has just occurred. If this was merely an institution playing with the idea of Co-Facilitation, I suggest that the question would have not been asked. Traditional roles would have reasserted themselves at the pause

in the activity and the AAM would have passed judgement on what had just happened. I suggest that by allowing Jackson to have the final word, the practice of the theatre company skews traditional conceptions of learning disability. Here Jackson is trusted to have the capability to assess the success of the piece and the success of a group of visiting students' collective attempts to perform a drum piece.

Additionally, the use of positive descriptors ('wonderful musician', 'share knowledge' 'impart his wisdom') frames Jackson in a way that challenges traditional conceptions of what learning disability can mean and do. It reveals an attitude to learning disability that perceives learning disability as a way of being replete with agency, competency and capability; something that the tale itself confirms (Jackson writing a song that he shares with the one day group and facilitates them to perform, all the while 'never drawing attention away' from the group). The term facilitator too (with its etymological roots in notions of making easy) both signifies and acknowledges the ability of Jackson to ease the experience of the group under his tutelage. This creates an appreciation of learning disability far removed from ableist notions of deficit or lack: a competent and capable learning disabled artist freely sharing his skills and knowledge in order to assist others in completing a task. In Foucauldian terms Jackson, through his sensitive act of facilitation, 'fictions history' by challenging notions that learning disabled people can only be on the receiving end of instances of teaching, learning and care.

The Associate Artist for Theatre and Engagement (AATE) picks up on the process of bringing learning disabled people into the heart of practice and planning. During our conversation they note (AATE lines 200-204):

"Because of the development of the Artists and because of the changes within our, the way we work creatively, I suppose, is like

having the Artists in a more collaborative role. And helping us make stuff... with their..., with them in the decision making from as early on as possible."

In doing so the AATE adds to a sense of a company that is trying to involve and include everyone in the decisions made 'as early on as possible'. They share how this process came about (AATE lines 220-238):

**AATE:** I think it's been a slow change over time. Erm, and I think it's a supportive process. You know, we have an idea. And it used to be very much that the idea came from upstairs and went downstairs. And that's changing to the Artists being more involved in the processes of that.

**JC:** So Co-facilitation stuff?

**AATE:** Yeah, yeah. I've really pushed with the Co-facilitation and then we had internships on [*name of production*] and all that sort of stuff. Like sort of... I suppose we're figuring it out together. So we have an idea and we realise that actually it means nothing unless the Artists are involved and part of this process. So it becomes a conversation. Everything becomes a conversation. Where everyone's got their thoughts and their understanding. And whatever is on the table. And then we can support whatever's not there that needs to be there I suppose. You know, we're thinking of doing this. We're doing this because of that and we think it will have this impact. And people can come with us on that journey, or they can ask questions or we can go: "Right! You don't understand what we're trying to do, so I'm not doing it properly, so let's talk about it some more." So bringing people together to have a better conversation so we're all on the same page about why and what we're doing.



It reveals what I witnessed as standard daily practice (the involvement of learning disabled people in all aspects of their training and development) as something that has been hard won and worked through collaboratively. An ongoing conversation between staff, artists and students. There is also the frank admission that this project is neither perfected, nor complete. But the manner in which it is to be perfected and completed is stated explicitly: by encouraging 'better conversations' staff, artists and students can continue the process of 'figuring it out together' exactly how the role can be developed. The Head of Creative Engagement picks this up (HCE lines 594-601):

"I would like the inclusive approach to be rolled out wider. So when we're looking at things like work placements, work experiences, people working in other companies, erm, people coming here and learning that the idea of working alongside one another is expanded on and people begin to understand that. That that's possible. That is not impossible. And that, that idea, that, erm, that hierarchy of you know: "Oh I'm supporting that person to be in this meeting." That's not there anymore. We're both contributing, we're collaborating together."

Again, we see a parity and equity at the heart of daily practice. Edicts are not handed down from on high. In this space the 'bureaucratic order' is undermined because the hierarchies of the 'bureaucratic order' no longer exist. The AATE tells that 'it used to be that the idea very much came from upstairs and went downstairs', but in its current iteration the theatre is working hard to overturn this hierarchical structure by conversing with the learning disabled artists and students in order to ensure that people's requirements and expectations are realised.

Indeed, many conversations with the staff converged around the idea of listening to the artists and students enrolled upon the various courses and

responding dynamically to what they were told. A good example of this is taken from my conversation with the Learning and Participation Coordinator (LPC lines 303-350):

**LPC:** I think a lot of that is due to communication and openness... I think for a number of years we did have the comment - especially in lockdown where we were trying to separate us [creative/teaching/support staff] from the office [administrative staff] - there was a comment actually made in our team meeting in summer, in our planning meeting where we always invite a number of artists, that they felt like there was a definite upstairs/downstairs divide. But we... in response to that we have created, erm, different job roles especially around performances. I think the first time we did this was around [name of production] where we had three intern opportunities. One of those interns is with us on one day theatre doing a supported work placement. Erm, one is now our assistant producer. And that now, erm, we've got people on the board now that we've worked with. [Name of Artist], one of our artists, comes up into our staff meetings every week, and is the voice for the artists and shares what they're doing. Erm, but then also hears what the company's doing and is able to share that back.

**JC:** And challenging the upstairs/downstairs thing?

**LPC:** Definitely, and we're able after Covid to relax more. I think, you know, we'd made a really good start on it before lockdown, and then unfortunately the lockdown kind of stunted it. But there's definitely a transition, and within planning we'd made - this was last year - we'd made offers... offers from people in the office, erm, that don't usually work with the artists or students, erm, offered to give whatever their skill is, er, either the chance to interview them or a workshop, or, whatever that needed to be. So, er, you know, [name of Marketing Officer] offered one of the artists the

opportunity to become an assistant marketing officer. So [name of artist], [name of artist] does that.

**JC:** So what's he doing as part of that role?

**CM:** So he does all of our social media for us when he's with us. So last, last week, he was taking lots of images and, erm, him and [Marketing Officer] talk about the strategy and make sure that, you know, they've got the right phrases and all of those things, and also he's included in lots of different meetings. Er, so we're trying to just be open about lots of different things. Erm, anything, so nothing's a secret. And you know we, we've talked about - unfortunately we've not been able yet to physically make it happen - having hot desks that the artists can come and use just so they are able to be in the office and hear what's going on. And hopefully that will increase this year. I know there is an, erm, the *If Group* kind of, the group that did all the planning. There's been a couple of meetings this year so they're starting a group again that are working on where the artists want to be. And having a number of representatives from that being able to share what they talk about. What they actually want from us.

The role of Co-Facilitator should not be thought of as tokenistic. Indeed, the LPC gives several examples of progression from the 'intern opportunities' offered by the company. One intern is now on a 'supported work placement' (the type of placement identified by Grover and Piggot, 2016 and Beyer 2020 as most likely to return positive outcomes for learning disabled workers), another has become an 'assistant producer' at the theatre, a third is installed as a permanent member 'on the board' representing the students and artists and the final individual is identified as being the 'assistant marketing officer' who meets with his colleague the Marketing Officer to 'talk about strategy' relating to the promotion of forthcoming events and promotions. Just reading the previous sentence brings a smile to my face. Four instances that undermine ableist, neoliberal conceptions of the capabilities and capacities of learning disabled

people in the workplace. An insight into how smoothly roles and responsibilities could be generated for learning disabled people. A successful, well established company finding ways to make work work for the prospective worker, rather than expecting the worker to fit the work. No hiding behind the vagaries of the 'reasonable adjustments' clause invoked by so many employers as a way to lock people with learning disabilities out of their workplaces, but rather a business looking to install 'hot desks' in the upstairs office space for artists 'just so they are able to be in the office and hear what's going on.'

This description of the process of listening and reacting to the changing requirements of those accessing the space ('What they want from us.') is indicative of the dynamism of the company. It is reactive, not prescriptive. As the Partner Programme Lead and Access Champion (PPLAC) noted during their interview (PPLAC lines 244-249):

"So I think having, erm, people with learning disabilities front and centre of the narrative means that you're always listening. I mean I'm sure, I'm sure... things go wrong sometimes. But that's more about being human, getting something wrong. But I think [name of theatre] are listening. And they're happy to change. They're flexible, fluid."

This willingness of the theatre company to change and adapt to the requirements of its artists and students, rather than dictate the terms of engagement, indicates the drive by staff to constantly improve the experience of the artists and students who access the building. It is a process that inverts the usual relationship between individual and institution which traditionally sees the former accede to the demands of the latter. As the Associate Artist in Theatre and Engagement notes (AATE lines 247-264), this endeavour requires sustained effort to achieve:

**AATE:** It's, erm... I think it's not an easy process. It's not what we're... naturally geared to... It's always the system that there are people in power aren't there? So what we're constantly doing is trying to... erm... equalise that power within our building, within our means I suppose. So there's a lot of sort of: "This is the way it's always been done." And, and I think that us being thirty-whatever years old sometimes works against us. Because: "This is the way it's been. And that's what we'll do." And you go: "Yeah, but I don't think that's right anymore."

**JC:** Yes, now it could be done this way.

**AATE:** Yeah. And how about we try and do this. And time is short and staff, you know, you never have quite enough staff or enough time or enough... hours in your contract to do all the stuff you would like to do. So sometimes it's challenging, erm, to make what you think is right. And it takes a lot - like I've been saying - banging on the door and going on about stuff to go: "Yeah but why are we doing that? And why aren't we doing it yet? And can I have another day to do it? To do a bit of this... and can I? Can we have a go see how it goes and not just let it fizzle out or not have time to manage it properly?"

This desire to constantly provide first class training and development opportunities for learning disabled artists seems to be part of the reflective practice of the company, best summed up by the Associate Artist for Theatre, (AAT lines 253-262):

**AAT:** I think you've constantly got to question your practice haven't you? Because a lot of people look to [name of theatre]. And look to [name of theatre] and think what are [name of theatre] doing? And that has to be the heart of our practice. Like how are we equal? How is this an equal partnership? So, for example, making sure there is an Artist within staff meetings, you know it's not just staff.

Because then, what's the... we're not doing as we should be. And it's making sure that those voices are listened to... are heard at every opportunity. So even in planning week, you know, there are Artists there. There's always reflection happening: "Right, OK, what can we do a bit better at?" Things like that. Does that answer your question?

## **Institutional conviction**

The role of the Co-Facilitator, and its perceived importance at the theatre as one of the tools for 'raising aspirations', speaks more broadly of a deep institutional conviction in the possibility of learning disability that marks this workplace as radically different from traditional working environments. In this section I will use excerpts to show that this belief is not idealistic, but rather grounded pragmatically. The theatre exists because learning disabled artists are able to devise, rehearse, produce and perform professional works of theatre to paying audiences. The theatre, then, intuitively understands the possibility and capability of learning disability where other employers may remain ignorant. One staff member, the Partner Programme Lead and Access Champion, was explicit about the action that such knowledge demands (PPLAC lines 327-335)

"Well I think [name of company] - as Europe's leading theatre company for working with and for people with learning disabilities - I think they have a voice, erm, that they need to, erm, share. Because they've got a unique perspective on that experience. And the challenges and the difficulties around that experience as well that should be shared. So while I think it's been interesting exploring different texts - and that's all well and good, I think, erm, there's a sort of... almost a moral obligation to kind of really challenge the world and challenge the narrative that people with learning disabilities *can't do*. Because that is still the current thinking."

There is an idea of the theatre company being at the vanguard of how disability and non-disability can work alongside each other. The suggestion exists that there is an ongoing open conversation about how to provide an equitable environment in which the artists and students can continue to develop. A process that involves inviting people with learning disabilities into the heart of the company ('an artist in staff meetings') so that 'even in planning week' people with learning disabilities get a chance to listen to comment upon the intended direction of the theatre company.

This general approach, of challenging traditional conceptions of what learning disability can mean and do, is supported by staff. As the PPLAC noted (PPLAC lines 324-325):

"What I've really enjoyed is seeing [name of theatre] become more political. I've certainly... really, really liked that."

This is corroborated by the comments made by the Artistic Director (AD) (AD lines 40-49):

"So I think when I first started out I hear a lot of, erm, a lot of narratives or like being said in a proud way, saying that: "Oh! we don't see disability on stage." Or: "People with disability can perform as good, as well, as people without disabilities. People with disability can do *Shakespeare* as good.' This kind of thing. And then for me it's an identity, you don't really need to, like, overcome. It's, what is the aesthetics in that person's identity? And then also I find it troubling if you say you don't see disability. Then what do you see? Like do you want, are people trying to, er, pretend that this person is not what they are. And then what is the default then. What are you trying to see them as if not as themselves?"

We see an articulation of learning disability as a distinct and vibrant identity. Not something to be covered, explained away or apologised for, but accommodated and valued as another possible way of being human that has something to share with other identities (AD lines 286-287):

"we use a different inclusive approach so that it makes sure that it's not... we're not these *specimens* being looked at."

Indeed, instead of being passive objects, it would appear that the theatre company strives hard to instil within their artists and students a sense of their agency and capability to be involved through their art in creating the conditions for change:

"And I feel like we manage to identify, with a group of learning disabled actors, a lot of different barriers that they face in their daily life. Which is very, erm, unique to them, as well as... really there's a lot of injustice. So there is something really powerful where the artists themselves then point out the injustice and want to, to lift them. And this is one of the ways to actually affect change and like get allies within the audience." (AD interview lines 228-234)

"In the discussion, collaboration, with the artists we've talked about campaigning, protest, being radical and affecting change. And then... so that I think... none of them...or maybe one of them amongst the fourteen [artists] have joined a protest or a demonstration experience. And there are so much barrier in joining a protest... but they want to affect change. So, and then, the acting, this is what they're good at. It's what they're comfortable and can do. So it is through the acting, it's a radical act they're doing in a safe and, hopefully, effective as well, situations. Joining the action in that way." (AD interview lines 366-374)



The second excerpt can be viewed almost as the mission statement for the action described in Scene 1 that opened the previous chapter. The purpose of the activities and creative output at the theatre is not to 'overcome' learning disability but to agitate for it to be seen as a valid identity. This is not learning disability hiding away or trying to pass as able, rather a theatre of learning disability *for and by* people with learning disabilities. As such it fits within the possible connotations of learning disability suggested by the critical disability movement. What we are seeing at the theatre is a prolonged physical manifestation of the theories suggested by scholars such as Goodley (2017), Campbell (2009), and Tremain (2005), what Minich (2016 online) refers to as 'the scrutiny of normative ideologies' (such as who can be a trainee actor, an assistant producer, on the board, an assistant marketing officer etc.) 'not for its own sake but with the goal of producing knowledge in support of justice for people with stigmatised bodies and minds.'

Looking back through the interviews with all staff members a recurrent theme is the sense of an institutional challenge to what learning disability can mean and do. Having worked closely with learning disabled artists and students for over thirty years, the company has a clearer insight than most as to what learning disabled people can achieve. This insight acknowledges learning disabled people as active, productive members of society. As dynamic individuals with the ability to create and narrate their own stories. Individual subjects brimming with agency, rather than objects of pity, charity and revulsion.

A good starting point to illustrate this is a segment taken from my conversation with the Executive Director (ED). She had been talking about the transition of the theatre company to its current location from a previous space that it had shared with a leading children's charity. She shares (ED lines 101-132):

**ED:** I think being in a building that's clearly a children's charity... kind of reinforces both the charity model and the infantilization of disabled people. And I think it's still quite, in our experiences, it's still quite prevalent in the larger charities especially. You know the larger, kind of disability charities, still are rather predicated on some rather very old fashioned thinking. I think the thing for me is... the thing I find is a problem with a lot of disability charity models, disability charity working - and also the benefit system - it starts from a position that these people are *unproductive*. And are never ever going to be productive, independent members of a civic society.

**JC:** And what's your problem with that?

**ED:** Well my problem is that it's bollocks! And my problem with that is that if you, if you start, if you start from... a set of assumptions like that you're gonna make really bad decisions around how you create opportunity for independent thinking, for decision making, for opportunity. If you come from a social model of disability perspective of... the challenges are not, they're not with the individual but with the systems and the structure and with the wider society. What do we need to do to change that in order to facilitate, erm, opportunity? You, you, I believe, you get to better decisions that will not only in the longer term be cheaper for everybody, erm, but also, you know, you... if, if you can support somebody to be as active and independent a citizen in civil, social society as possible, then you will get much better results for the longer term. And I think that is true. And of course people have different access needs. Of course some people are, do, have a higher, erm, higher level of need in terms of the interventions they need other people to make, whether that's on a practical level, whether that's around decision making supporting vulnerabilities. But I think that you can still get to good decisions if your decision making is predicated on a set of assumptions that accept this person as being a valuable, valued, productive member of society.

Again, there is no naivety in this extended excerpt. The ED does not try to hide the fact that people with learning disabilities may have 'different access needs'. But whereas in 'the systems and the structure' of 'wider society' this is often a point of contention, the ED makes a plea for a more equitable and meritocratic society (such as the one being imagined within the confines of the theatre company) in which this 'higher level of need' could be viewed as unproblematic. Something that is simply the result of the difference that exists across the spectrum of humanity, and therefore addressed accordingly.

### **Scene 3 - The Activist Panel**

I am alone in Studio 2. I am feeling quietly triumphant and most definitely pleased with myself. A reluctant and nervous orator, I have just finished pitching my recruitment presentation to the students who I hope will be at the heart of my research. I had been on edge since waking up, rehearsing the myriad of ways that the talk could implode: fluffing my words or forgetting important sections of the presentation. Worst of all, of course, was the nagging dread that after finishing the presentation my ideas would be treated with indifference, and that no-one would express an interest in taking part.

But it had not transpired that way. As I began to settle into my talk, I sensed that people were engaged with my idea. I heard murmurs of assent as I located my research by discussing the difficulties young adults experience when trying to find suitable training and work after leaving school. I saw nods of heads and people move forward in their seats as I suggested that this problem needed to be investigated and solutions found. During the pauses I had incorporated into the research to allow for questions, I had been encouraged that not only did people want to talk about my research, but that they also openly agreed with the things I was saying and added their own (troubling) experiences with both employers and the conditional workfare state. This engagement helped to turn the presentation

into more of a conversation, moving it from a monologue to a dialogue, and I felt myself relax beyond my imposter syndrome. And so when, at the conclusion of my presentation, I asked who would like to take away a presentation pack, I felt encouraged and relieved when everyone (staff included) asked for one.

Following my talk, the group broke for lunch. As people filed past, they shared kind words about what they had heard. Packing my things away, I soon found myself alone in the room, feeling quietly pleased about the way the session had gone. Lost in my self-congratulatory reverie, I did not immediately notice the two students, one of whom was James, who had returned to the room and were waiting at the door. James spoke and said: "We've saved you a space next to us. We'd like to ask you some questions." Pleased that they wanted to continue the conversation, I followed them both into the Agora, which was filled with the sounds and sights of people enjoying a convivial lunch.

I sat down at a table with four students and we began by revisiting the presentation I had given. At first I felt on solid ground and comfortable with the interaction, but I soon sensed that the conversation was discreetly being pulled towards an issue that the students wanted to raise. Several times James paused and said 'it was great.....but there's one thing...' before pausing and not revealing what the 'thing' was. I didn't press James further, wanting to give him space to raise the 'thing', and as others talked across him it was not immediately addressed.

However, after raising the issue a third time it quickly became apparent that whatever the 'thing' was it had begun to stall the conversation. James appeared to be grappling with how to broach a sensitive topic and looked to his peers for support. I saw one nod their head in encouragement and murmur to James, *sotto voce*, 'go on'.

'The thing is,' began James 'is that I don't know if you noticed, but that while what you were saying in there was really good...' here pausing and considering (with what I realise with the benefit of hindsight the best way not to cause me

upset) what to say next, 'but it was a bit..., a bit childish. It seemed a bit simplistic.' He added hurriedly 'I hope you don't mind me saying it, and I know that it's really difficult to know where everyone is at.' After finishing he looked at their peers who smiled back and nodded in agreement.

I felt my stomach churn and my heart drop. I wondered what it was that I'd said that was ill-considered, and was mildly distraught that I may have caused unintentional offence. I also realised simultaneously that, rather than a comfortable lunchtime chat, I was actually in the presence of an accommodating, yet formidable, activist panel. In the time it had taken me to pack up my stuff and congratulate myself, they had been adroit enough to mobilise, form an action group, agree on an agenda and find a space for our meeting to take place.

For my part I realised it was incumbent for me to reassure people that I was an ally hoping to learn from them, rather than an expert investigating, diagnosing and analysing their condition. Although too dramatic to say that it felt that things were hanging by a thread, I was keenly aware that the answers I gave to the group would round their picture of me both as an individual and researcher, and would inform their future decisions regarding whether or not to give their time for my research.

What followed over the subsequent 45 minutes was without doubt one of the most stimulating (and exacting) discussions I have had across the course of my PhD. We talked of assumptions of ability and how to reconcile differing levels of understanding into group discussions. The ways in which all could be included, without some individuals losing the thread of what was being discussed and others feeling alienated and infantilised. The group's concerns turned around what they viewed to be my over-explanation and simplification of words such as 'thesis', 'dissertation', 'consent' and 'impact'. "We knew what you were saying," said one "and if we didn't, we would have asked." Fair enough.

Additionally, personal stories emerged from the four students of being talked down to, or 'talked at' as Tink put it, in a variety of professional environments (school, medical settings, jobcentres). Of how it feels, on a personal level, when your audience is either patently not listening, or listens then summarises your thoughts in a way that completely misrepresents what you were trying to say (i.e. EHC plan meetings and WCA assessments).

I began to hear personal testimony of the injustices (indeed downright prejudice) they had experienced when attempting to access the labour market. Of trial shifts that had been inexplicably terminated early allowing the individual no opportunity to showcase their ability (the tale of the ice cream parlour owner claiming a power cut meant he had to shut his store for the day, only for it to be mysteriously open an hour later being an exemplar of this evasion). Or stories of employers concocting flimsy excuses as to why individuals were unsuited to the vacant position. Or of arbitrary time restrictions rules placed on concessionary travel passes that prevent disabled workers from getting to work on time, thus providing would-be employers with a readymade get out for not employing people. In sum a system stacked first to expose and highlight their disability then punish these same individuals for having been so labelled as 'other'.

As my soup went cold, I think that I managed to convince the group that my research is an attempt to present their concerns to a wider audience, rather than being a vanity project on my behalf. One student was kind enough to reassure me that people at the project knew I was 'not one of them' as he put it, meaning I guess someone who is happy to continue with the continued exclusion of people with learning disabilities from society at large.

As an aside, it caused me to pause and consider how to progress. Reflecting on the group's issues with the words I employed, I think my decade-long stint as a Teaching Assistant at a SEND specialist school skewed how I crafted the

presentation. In that particular environment I was used to helping deliver lessons that had differentiation hard baked into them. I fell into the trap, I believe, of assuming that what worked with one group of students would work with another, without recognising the dynamic differences that define this particular group of students. Whilst I maintain that I would prefer to be understood by the least able member of the group, rather than excluding them from the conversation, I should have drawn more heavily on my prior knowledge of the individuals in the group from my extensive period of observation at the theatre company. I had seen them interact with management staff, tutors and support workers and conduct interpersonal relationships from positions of equity. I resolved not to make this error again.

Putting self-flagellation aside, the bigger point of the scene described above is to document the effect that the expressed belief that the staff have in the students' abilities (both creative and non-creative) and the environment of the theatre itself seem to engender and encourage the students to speak and voice their desires and concerns, aspirations and frustrations. It is to this opportunity and possibility of expression that I shall now turn.

### **Conviction in action**

The people who work at the theatre very much define their role as bringing opportunity and possibility into the experience of the artists and students who engage with the training and development and produce the art that keeps the whole project rolling. The Head of Creative Engagement (HCE lines 436-459) notes:

"There's some kind of culture here of, erm..., I think it's about opportunity and creating those opportunities for those things to happen. So, on the Performance Academy I was down there one day - I think it was last year - and there was people working on their pieces with [name of Associate Artist in Music]. So everyone

was in different rooms, on different instruments, and it was like you could have been in any music conservatoire in any country. And I just thought: "What a wonderful moment!" I just had a moment, you know (inaudible)... and it was just what's possible. It's about, I think, chucking out of the window what's impossible. It's just all: "What is possible?" But I'm very much on that keel, you know. I try not to think it's limited. And I think here... the possibilities are endless and so it's that combination of having the right people that encourage that to happen and don't limit people. So, erm... there isn't...there isn't erm, there isn't as far as I can see an end point."

Again, the easy use of 'conservatoire' (a space usually created for and populated by the elite) by the HCE suggests at once that the training being delivered to the students is consummate with what non-disabled students might experience in other educational establishments, and that the students in the Performance Academy 'conservatoire' are themselves worthy of being considered as part of a vanguard of the next generation of top class (disabled) artists. Commenting on this himself, the Associate Artist for Music notes (AAM lines 33-35):

"And I suppose it's my job to make sure that they have enough opportunities to do different projects and different focuses and different things."

Indeed, this sense of choice is echoed by the Associate Artist for Drama (AAD lines 190-197) at the theatre, when she says self-deprecatingly:

"One of the things that I'm really passionate about - and I didn't do it very well earlier and I'm very aware of it - is, is choice. So the movements in particular that the students have done this term are all theirs. They're all theirs. It's not sort of my stuff, it's theirs. I've



facilitated it and said: "Right can you do x, y and z and see what happens." Erm, and I think because historically, you know choice has been taken away from people with disabilities, so it's really important."

The merits of introducing this choice and opportunity are referenced by the AAM when he discusses the ongoing task of writing a second musical with the students at the theatre (AAM lines 87-94):

"And then I suppose the other side of the music is getting them to be creative, because a lot of things that we do will either involve improvisation or they'll involve...erm... writing words to songs. Erm, we're writing our second musical now. The ideas come from the students and I've sort of got to put it together. If you're talking about. You've gotta have ownership of the ideas and if they have got that then people, they'll, they just buy into it."

by doing this, the AAM reveals that the genesis of the idea for the forthcoming musical was unearthed (AAM lines 114-117):

"It was actually one of the students had this idea...the idea of doing something about bags. And it's like: "Well that's brilliant!" Because one, nobody's done it and two, you've got so much scope to deal with that."

This sense of students achieving was shared by the AAT (AAT lines 278-280):

"You also get, like, just magic moments where I'm watching pieces and I'm like: "My goodness me! That's so powerful, and I don't think you know how powerful that is."

She then went on to relate a tale that confirmed the positive outcome for students that spring from an organisational ethos that transmits its regard for its attendees (AAT lines 265-276):

"Two minutes before we're about to go on and do a show, in the showcase, the summer showcase. Like, erm, it's a sharing of work that we've done from the year. Erm, and one of the students just said: "Yeah so I've never actually got to this point before." And we were like: "Sorry? What?" And they were like: "Yeah, I've never actually performed. I've always ducked out. Is this a good time to tell you that?" And I was like: "Errrr! No you're not gonna duck out. You're gonna be absolutely fine." And they did. And they performed. And again for me it was just that magic of like: "Yeah I've never done this before. And I'm going to go and do it. And I'm trusting everybody, and I'm part of this process. And I want to do it."

Ultimately, as the conversations in the next chapter (which focuses upon the comments shared by the students themselves with the students) will illustrate, the deep seated organisational conviction in the capability and possibility of learning disability ensures that people feel trusted to be 'part of the process' of training and performing at the theatre, and in so doing are able to realise and achieve their goals of becoming professional artists.

### **Interaction with external agencies**

Contrasted and juxtaposed with this conviction in creating the correct conditions in which established and nascent artists may train, develop and thrive were the comments made by staff regarding their interaction with external agencies, such as funding bodies and governmental departments. As told and as heard they sounded like instances of the 'bureaucratic order' that Titchkosky (2020) implores us to begin to cut paths away from. What was heartening is that

pervading ethos of the company seems to instil in staff a desire and confidence to challenge inequity and prejudice wherever it may occur.

In the course of providing the wide range of in house training and development opportunities, the theatre is brought into contact with external bodies such as central and local governmental departments and funding agencies in order to continue to provide its training and development opportunities to the wide range of individuals who regularly access the theatre. As described by the staff, this process is often far from intuitive and accessible. Importantly, however, the belief in the project underway at the theatre allows the company to challenge bad practice when it is encountered. The first extract is taken from the conversation held with the Executive Director of the theatre company. In it she explains the difficulties faced when interacting with both the Arts Council and the European Regional Development Fund (ED lines 155-191):

**ED:** So the, the trends of the government will directly affect the trends of DCMS [Department for Culture, Media and Sport]. So you then have... you're always, you know, there's always gonna be shifts and changes and, erm, but there's definitely a - when you've worked in the Arts for the length of time I have - you do see that, you know, what goes around comes around. There's certain cycles. They're not identical, they're not predictable totally, but there are different cycles of thinking that influence Arts investment. But one of the things I've been involved in for many, many, long, long, lots and lots of times and in lots of different ways is conversations and opportunities and various different ways of working with the [name of funding body] around accessibility. And what that means. And... before and during lockdown period I was involved in - you know there was a bit more space for these consultation things that sometimes get rather knocked to the side. Specifically around learning disability access in terms of funding and, erm, resources.

And one of the key things was trying to reduce the amount of... word and text and digital based factors in the processes.

**JC:** Such as?

**ED:** Such as having to go to an online portal and fill in a, you know, a standard set of criteria. So [name of funding body] have a *particularly* inaccessible, not intuitive at all on any level, erm, portal.

**JC:** Kafkaesque? Sort of dance your way through it and end up back at the start kind of thing?

**ED:** If only it was that simple! It's probably the least intuitive online portal system for doing anything ever in the history of the world!

**JC:** Almost designed *not* to grant access to funding?

**ED:** Yeah! It's probably, it's probably only exceeded by anything to do with European funding - the European Regional Development Funding. Anyway, so lots of conversations about that. And there was a - they opened up a consultation process - and said: "Can we just say before we start, the one thing that's off the table - it's called Grantium - the one thing that's off the table is Grantium. We can't have, we can't even have a conversation about that 'cos that's not gonna change." And I just said: "Look, you know, that is... you're immediately... If you're not willing to engage with the problems that are created by that fundamental... you know your main, if only, mechanism to access funding. And you're not willing to even open up the conversation around it. We're kind of on a hiding to nothing really."

Later on (ED lines 218-223) she offers her opinion on the process described above:

I think for me one of the things that I see, not just with [name of funding body] but elsewhere as well, is those decisions where they want things to be standardised in order, with the idea that if you standardise it it makes life easier. Well, actually, the standardisation tends to make life easier for the people dealing with the information at the receiving end.

This last sentence is an astute summation of the processes Foucault refers to as governmentality. Organisations collate and tabulate individuals in order to administer coterminously to the edicts of power/knowledge (the 'certain cycles') that inform their acts of collation and tabulation. This sense of a system created to make it easier for the organisation, rather than the user, was repeated during the conversation with the Head of Creative Engagement (HCE). We had been talking about an online program the company had created during lockdown in order to continue to provide access to the arts for learning disabled people. The excerpt (HCE lines 260-290) begins with me asking about the project's future:

**JC:** So what's next for [Name of online course] then?

**HCE:** Well, so, there hasn't been a next because obviously it's funding dependent and I don't know whether that money still is a thing... and it was so, so complicated. It took me another 6 months to finish the reports because it was...

**JC:** What was complicated?

**HCE:** Erm, every person has a booklet which is about 10 pages long. And if you, and then it all had to be scanned into a computer then uploaded to a central kind of government portal. And then somebody looks at it and if there's a slight thing that doesn't match it all gets sent back to you, so you have to redo it and rescan about 24 different sides of paper.

**JC:** A set of strict parameters with no sense of understanding of the needs and requirements of the students trying to access the course?

**HCE:** Yes! And the documentation for [name of training project] erm had to be hand-delivered to a place in Morley so it could be received...

**JC:** Hand delivered!? Are we back in the 19th century?

**HCE:** Yeah, yeah 'cos an organisation called [name of organisation] looked after the element of it for the - I don't know if it was for the North - It's really complex, and you ask anyone...

**JC:** It sounds Kafkaesque! So, sorry, so European Social Fund being accessed by the government who then push the money out to a local provider...

**HCE:** Yes, and then there's a place in Birmingham you, you contact as well, erm... and it's really, really, *really* complicated. So it took a lot of tenacity to keep on, keep on, keep on, 'cos we couldn't get the last bit of money until every report had been done... Erm, but yeah, it was extremely complicated. I think now having done it I would know again, I would know how to do it. But at the time we were doing it so remotely... you basically make all your mistakes and then have to go and fix them. They don't give you any sort of forward warning that you need to do this, this, this. So you've got some documents on a G:Drive you then go into and it's got instructions but you might not know what you're looking for.

Later on in the same conversation (HCE interview lines 295-302), she also suggested that such difficulties weren't unusual within the sector:

"It was a miracle that we got the last payment. I could imagine lots of people don't get it. They just would not be able to... deal with... and once I - I've done quite a bit of extra reporting for [name of ED] so, er, there's another fund, [name of fund], and their reporting is very intense as well. You have to be really clear what you're reporting back. Because the data they collect on people around, erm, characteristics, erm... they ask a lot... So I wasn't gonna fail and not do it, but it literally, it was, I was out of my freelance hours. I was doing it on other time."

It seems to me that the above extracts are in line with Foucault's diagnosis regarding the experience of the individual when interacting with 'bureaucratic

order' and its acts of governmentality. Foucault is explicit that the processes of governmentality, and the technologies of power they employ, while presented as benign and for the benefit of the individual, are in reality part of the project of fixing and locating individual subjects, rendering them 'knowable' and thus 'accountable' and able to be administered to. Governmentality demands full confession from the individual subject (under threat of inevitable sanction) at the same moment that it itself remains opaque.

Under such circumstances bureaucratic agencies proudly advertise that adequate funding and grants are available, but in reality 'lots of people don't get it'. In this environment 'reporting' becomes 'very intense' and 'really, really, *really* complicated'. In an age of mass digital communication 'documentation' has to be 'hand-delivered'. 'Online portals' are experienced as 'particularly inaccessible', and 'consultations' on how to improve bureaucratic systems (such as the sententiously monikered *Grantium*, dripping as it does with paternalistic benevolence and implied munificence) become paper exercises. Where 'if there's a slight thing that doesn't match' whole tranches of paperwork are rejected outright. No wonder those forced into contact with these agencies out of their drive to provide first class training and development opportunities for learning disabled adults describe the 'tenacity' and willingness to work extra hours required to succeed.

Another example of a member of the theatre encountering and overcoming the 'bureaucratic order' arose during my conversation with the Director of the Performance Academy (DPA). I will revisit it below, making reference once again to the concept of the Contact Zone

### **Pass/Fail, Achieving/Improving/Excelling & the Contact Zone**

Pratt identifies two processes at work within the Contact Zone. One process, Transculturation, is described by Pratt as a way:

"to describe processes whereby members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant or metropolitan culture." (1991, p36)

The key words here, I believe, are 'select' and 'invent': the idea of there being a choice, individually and collectively, available to subordinated groups and a possibility within the theoretical space of the Contact Zone for members of these groups to take what is given to them and transmute it for their own ends.

An example of transculturation occurred during my interview with the Director of the Performance Academy (DPA). To give you some background, We were talking about the working relationship they had forged with the institution that accredits their course. In particular, at this point of the interview we were talking about the assessment terminology that they had developed to chart the students' progress. (DPA lines 480-487):

"Yeah, well, so... part of our accreditation, part of our assessment is that we created our own language. So we knew that pass and fail might not work for our students. And we did some consultation with them, um, what does pass mean? What does fail mean? And how does that make you feel? Erm and then we talked about words that meant success to them and, you know, another word for pass that they were comfortable with."

This consultation resulted in the terms 'improving, achieving, excelling' being adopted to replace pass and fail, and I think this instance of transculturation offers an insight into how people with learning disability could transform themselves from passive receivers of the bureaucratic order to active participants in their own training and development. In this case individuals who will have been subjected to assessments in a multitude of guises (educational, legal, medical,



governmental to name but a few) are suddenly transformed to being the overseers of a new type of assessment, thus troubling the 'bureaucratic order'. Rather than being designated to specific categories chosen and decided by others, we see here the possibility of young adults with learning disabilities being handed the reins to decide their own terms of designation. In short, the theatre trusted the students to generate the correct terminology and provided the opportunity in the form of the 'consultation' for this to arise.

But dissatisfied with the prospect of only enacting local institutional change, the theatre took this developing terminology to the university that currently accredits the academy course (DPA lines 506-514):

"And then when we took it back to them and they said yes, so yes... But what it meant was that when we had the program, er, approved they did say: "Because you're using your own language and that's fine, when you get certificates they will just say pass or fail on them." So we were doing this internal stuff but ultimately they were gonna get a pass or a fail on their certificate, so we were like: "Aaaw!" But [name of contact at university] was like: "We've got three years to get them on our side," erm, which is great... and actually it's happened a lot quicker than I thought."

When beginning to challenge the edicts of the 'bureaucratic order' I feel that it is sometimes easy to reify this order and conceive of it as immutable and impenetrable. But in reality, the bureaucratic order is constituted and reproduced by people like us. As Graeber notes (2015 p121):

"the ultimate hidden truth of the world is that it is something we make, and could just as easily make differently."

Bureaucracy may present itself as monolithic, but I think we should begin to conceive and describe it as being less stable and more permeable than that. One way of doing this, following Deleuze and Guattari, could be to think, describe and interact with the bureaucratic order rhizomatically rather than hierarchically - as an entity with multiple nodes and an infinitesimal number of entry points. For instance, the university could be viewed as a monolithic entity, but the theatre company located an ally who provided a rhizomatic point of entry through which to infiltrate, present their case and become part of the rhizome. Knowing what I now know about the theatre company, it did not surprise me that they 'created their own language' to grade the students. It seems entirely in keeping with the ethos of the theatre that it should, after consultation with the students, conclude that the traditional grading terminology 'had a lot of negative connotations for the students' and should therefore be overhauled.

## **Final Thoughts**

To conclude this chapter, it seems evident that the Theatre Company works hard on behalf of the wide range of learning disabled people who access the space of the theatre. A cynic may suggest that they have a vested interest in doing so, for without learning disabled people how could a theatre for learning disabled people exist. But the cynic would be wrong. They would have wilfully overlooked the considered praxis that drives the project onward. When thought and action are combined in the manner they are at the theatre the possibilities for learning disabled people suddenly seem endless. As a business that is in the business of producing theatre, it might be that they are better placed than other organisations to intuitively grasp Graeber's maxim. They are in the business of making things and this daily practice and experience may allow them to rework and rehearse things differently. To try alternative ways of providing support, training and development for the learning disabled Artists and students who work within the building.

Either way, the company thinks deeply about how its actions will affect those who work within it. It views learning disabled people as capable of producing artistic work that can be played locally, nationally and internationally. This belief leads to care and craft being taken to ensure that the learning disabled Artist/student experiences the language, training and the very space of the theatre itself as a place of possibility and opportunity. It is a company that doesn't just work with learning disabled people, but an organisation *for* learning disability and this marks it as unusual. In the following chapter I will focus on a group of learning disabled students enrolled upon the Performance Academy course and use their testimony to describe to the reader the effect that training in such an environment is having.

## Chapter 7 - Becoming Artists

"I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more."

Bob Dylan: *Maggie's Farm*

### Chapter overview

Having spent the previous chapter detailing the practices and protocols of the theatre company I shall now turn my attention to how this is experienced by a group of students who attend the theatre company as students on the Level 4 accredited Academy course. This section addresses directly my second research aim: To document the experience of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term training program. In what follows I aim to present to the reader a curated overview of the thoughts of the students enrolled on this course. Across three, fifteen minute conversations I was fortunate to be able to ask each student about their creative work, creative journey and creative futures.

### Introduction

During the process of transcription, re-reading and relistening back to the interviews two things struck me. Firstly, the recordings revealed the high regard in which they hold the theatre company. The students identified that the training offered by theatre is allowing them to develop and emerge as creative artists. Words such as 'family' and 'home' were invoked by the students when talking about their perceptions of the company, alongside expressions such as 'opportunity' and 'possibility'. This suggests that an environment has been created onsite that is at once professional, creative and supportive. A training environment in which the students appear not only to thrive and develop, but also to begin to perceive and conceive futures working within the creative industry as within their grasp. Secondly the conversations with the students revealed both their passion for the arts and their dedication towards developing themselves as artists. The collective desire to work within the creative industries is clear and

well articulated. This is a path that all students have actively chosen, rather passively accepted. Taken together these two factors allowed me to understand the importance of providing access to meaningful training for learning disabled people after leaving formal education. As this group demonstrated, by doing so, individuals are more likely to be invested in their training, thus increasing the chances of positive outcomes.

The structure of this chapter will split into two sections. It will start by documenting how the students found a path to the theatre and how they talk about the company, before moving onto excerpts in which the students talk about the work they have created as part of their training on the course. In the second section I shall also share the students' thoughts on how their current training is informing their future goals.

My reasons for focussing on these three elements link back to the aims of my research. In light of the fact of the limited scope of training opportunities available for post 16 learning disabled students when compared to their non-disabled peers, I was keen to document the experience of individuals who had been fortunate to enrol on a program that matched their interests. The attempts to elicit creative life histories from the students was my attempt to document this interest in the arts and to link it to arguments that more meaningful training and development opportunities, that match individuals' interests, need to be available to post 16 students with learning disabilities.

My interest in talking with the students about their thoughts on the environment they encounter at the theatre was driven by a desire to document their experience. The deleterious employment figures for people with learning disabilities (see Chapter 1) when compared with their non disabled peers suggest that, as it stands, people with learning disabilities are not being prepared for the vagaries and vicissitudes of the neo-liberal workplace. My initial observations at

the theatre suggested to me that the students were not only happy, but thriving within this particular space. By asking directly about their perceptions of the theatre company I hoped to substantiate this initial impression. The literature tells us that educational and training environments are often negatively experienced by learning disabled people (Tomlinson 2017, Grover and Piggott 2015). My initial observations at the site led me to believe that this was not the case here, and so I sought to document the students' thoughts to corroborate this.

Finally, my interest in documenting the future aspirations of the students was twofold. Firstly, to challenge ableist conceptions of learning disability that often conceives it as a limiting or diminished mode of being. Secondly, my work in the literature review around alternative futures (Chapter 2) led me to wonder about the possibility of young adults with learning disabilities escaping from the 'bureaucratic order' (Titchkosky 2020). In a highly conditional workfare state continued acts of governmentality attempt to (de)limit and prescribe the lives of learning disabled people. Technologies such as assessment and sanction are used as tools of subjugation. I was keen to discover whether, under the umbrella offered by the theatre company, students were beginning to question the constricted lives laid out for them and to imagine more meaningful and engaging futures.

Set against this generally positive overview will be a cautionary tale of what is at stake. I will share with readers a story of a student who, through an inability to access funding from his local council, was forced to give up his place at the Performance Academy. The lack of support shows how ableist ideology still informs decisions around who is and is not allowed to access training after leaving school, and gives a clear indication of the continued need to agitate for parity and equity for learning disabled people in contemporary society.

## **Artistic Impulses, New Beginnings**

In the second of the three interviews I focussed on asking students where their interest in the arts came from. This was an attempt to discover whether their desire to train in the arts was a recent or longstanding interest. It was an attempt on my behalf to elicit a (creative) life history from each individual, and to begin to understand what the importance of art in general, and creative practice in particular, is for each individual. As will be seen from the excerpts below, there was broad agreement amongst the students around the importance they attached to the centrality of artistic endeavour in their formative years. I believe they are important as they help to contextualise for the reader the long term commitment the students described towards engaging and training to be artists.

Broadly speaking, the students described their interest in the arts as enduring, and that their initial interest in the arts occurred as an almost revelatory, Damascene, moment in their lives. For instance, after I'd asked her where her interest in music and drama sprang from, Tink (interview 2, lines 43-48) replied:

"The dancing was mainly anything we had on the radio I'd just go into full on performance. Erm, I think that was a way of trying to tell my Mum that, you know, I need to express how I'm feeling through music and stuff like that and dancing. Erm, acting I was... I think it started in my... bedroom. I'd make up scenarios and then just act 'em out. Like I was actually living it!"

Tink seems to imply that music and dancing were a way of her being able to 'express' feelings that were maybe otherwise hard for her to articulate and share. Bob, when asked about the origin of his love of music in general, and playing the guitar in particular noted (interview 2, lines 10-16) that it was something that was a long standing interest:

"Erm... so, oh it was a very long time ago. I was about eleven when I did it, and from that moment that was when I realised that I just loved performing. Because I get to dance and music at the same time. And pretty much from there I just fell in love with it. And then, 2013 when I was about thirteen, that was when I wanted to take music to another level, and then that was when I first picked up a guitar."

Tom, like the previous two informants, shared that he had also always considered himself to be a 'creative person' (Interview 2, line 3-11):

Well I suppose, erm, I've always been interested in it really. And, erm, I sort of did, er, drama and performing at school, and I sort of felt like, sort of, er drama was an escape for kind of, er, lessons that I didn't sort of really enjoy. 'Cos I felt I was kind of more of a, a creative person. So that often happens in school where, you, you feel as though the lessons that you aren't as good at, you know, erm, and then you can sort of latch onto things, erm, which you are good at. So then I just kind of, erm, kind of felt like: "Yes I can do something with this!"

and describes drama as being 'an escape' from lessons that he 'didn't sort of really enjoy'. The final two informants, Bryan and James, also related tales of Drama being somewhat of a refuge from the pressures of formal education. James shared (Interview 2 lines 48-61) that:

**James:** Yeah, I have pathological demand avoidance syndrome. Which used to really affect me in school. I used to refuse to do any lessons that weren't drama. So that was quite interesting because... erm, because I was going through a really hard time at school and it just wasn't... for me. And then I missed about two years of school. Erm, but the only lesson I would go to would be drama.



**JC:** Because that was where your passion lay?

**James:** Yeah it was the only place I actually felt comfortable. It was like the only place I actually... I was very ill. I was very mentally ill and I didn't realise, erm, and I was having therapy, I was having lots of things. And then, erm, I realised that the only thing I ever really wanted to do for the rest of my life was act. That was like the only thing I wanted to do.

For James, engagement with the arts offered a path by which to navigate 'a really hard time at school' by offering a space in which he 'felt comfortable'. Similarly, Bryan (Interview 2, lines 7-22) began the description of his artistic journey by detailing his unhappiness and ultimate withdrawal from formal education:

**Bryan:** I walked out of school when I was fourteen 'cos I was bullied because of my mental health issues. And I went through a lot of severe abuse. You know people being beaten up, spat in my face, head down the toilet and I got to a point where: "Well if you've got a problem with me just say." And everyone had a problem with me and I just thought: "Well if I'm not wanted then I might as well just leave. Take me coat and my bag." And I just walked out. And left. My family weren't exactly impressed with what I did, but, that was my decision, and looking back now I don't really regret it really.

**JC:** No, schools can be brutal places can't they?

**Bryan:** I felt school was more prison than... and now thinking about it I wish I'd never, ever, ever went in the first place. 'Cos I felt, looking back at it now, I felt like I've wasted ten years in education for nothing.

Later in the conversation he revealed how his interest in drama had been sparked by volunteering to take part in a production of *Kes* at the college he attended after returning to education (Interview 2, line 35-52):

**Bryan:** And then Thursdays I remember they had performing arts. And they had dance and theatre. I didn't really enjoy dance at all, because I hated it, but they did theatre and... and also when I was on the course, on the last term of the course, 'cos in college you go from September to July, erm... from... the next year from January to July we decided, the college decided to do a show called Kes. And I auditioned, originally I auditioned for the part of the teacher, but then someone dropped out and I got the main role of Kes... And I thought: "I'll, I'll volunteer."

**JC:** So what made you volunteer? 'Cos you came from a standing start. Where does the interest in drama begin?

**Bryan:** I just felt, when I'd started theatre, felt it's something different. I felt... I just relaxed in it. And... being creative, like... you know and I felt like that I found something I can do. I felt like I can do something.."

For these final two students describe finding the arts, and beginning to train and develop within the sector as a turning point from previous negative experiences of education. Both Bryan and James use phrases of security ('relaxed', 'comfortable') when contrasting their participation in the arts as compared to other educational experiences, and there was a sense from all students that exposure to the arts had come with the realisation that this was a field in which they might be able to progress in (e.g. 'I felt like that I found something I can do').

Once discovered, all students related how the desire to practice the arts had been compelling and intoxicating. For instance, when talking of her first performance, as Tina Turner in a Christmas review called *Snow White and the Severn Popstars*, Tink (Interview 2, lines 72-90) remembered:

**Tink:** The show was, erm, the first taste of what performing was. Erm, but it was really positive and we managed to get, you know,

audience participation and that... erm, all the lines were perfect but they were like we could, in the show we were doing dance elements as well as singing elements mixed in with all the acting so it was great. Everything that I loved and... yeah we all got a copy of it and, er, yeah.

**JC:** So you say you got a taste of performing, but what was it in particular that kind of...

**Tink:** I think it was kind of like... so after I performed it and I was there, I could feel the adrenaline rushing right through me. Erm, I wasn't really bothered who was in the audience watching at that point. I was just like: "I wanna do it *again!*"

**JC:** That must have been really empowering.

**Tink:** It was. And then to hear all the... like positive comments back was like: "Oh my God! I'm actually really good at this!" Erm, 'cos you know you can be your own worst critic at times, and like: "Did I do it right? Could I do it better?" But then I went back and went: "OK, OK."

Likewise, Bryan reported a similar positive experience when he reflected on his first performance (Interview 2, lines 63-71):

"And then when I performed the show... we did two, we did two nights. And on the last day, yeah it was... and to perform in front of a lot of people that was my first proper show in [name of college] it was. It was at [name of college] where the stage was. And to perform in front of a live audience, to play the main character felt: "Wow!" You know it felt like: "Wow!" And afterwards I felt... and immediately afterwards when I did, after I did the course I felt: "Right! I want to be a professional actor." That's what I wanted to do."

For Bob, his interest in the performing arts was nurtured by being part of a school band whose name, *Band of Brothers*, suggests a fraternal shared experience (Interview 2, lines 28-48):

**Bob:** I then started a band with two other friends...

**JC:** Oh! Tell me about that. Was this at school too?

**Bob:** Yeah it was a school project, but then it turned into a band, it did, up until the day I graduated. And I did that for... four years I did. And the other two members started in 2015. And that was when we started the band.

**JC:** OK. And what was the name of the band?

**Bob:** Er, *Band of Brothers*. And that one to me. I fell in love with it. I didn't wanna separate from that. And we did some of the biggest shows we ever did in our careers, in our lives. Even throughout sixth form, to be teenagers to then becoming adults.

**JC:** So where were you playing?

**Bob:** So our first ever gig was at the end of school assemblies. But then as we got bigger we then got, started perform at Huddersfield Town Hall every year we did. Erm, and I remember that used to be in July time. And then, and then when it got to 2018 we did the final show which was twenty five years of my old school [name of School]. And that was the biggest show we ever did in our lives. And then after that show that was when I left... And then throughout my time in the band I was starting to realise what I was going to do for my future.

Tom (Interview 2, lines 43-49) shared that he had attended a decade of drama lessons before choosing drama at GCSE:

"Erm, so then I, er, obviously like most people in, in school when it kind of came to doing, er, my GCSE's I decided to do, er, pick GCSE drama because obviously I'd... something I'd really enjoyed and,

erm, having gone to drama school for ten years it was something that I sort of knew I was, er, really, really good at. And I ended up, er, doing really, really well in, er, GCSE drama in the end."

Finally, James shared a similar story of having started drama outside of school before continuing at GCSE (Interview 2, lines 36-45):

**James:** So then when I... so I started going to a drama class. Erm when I was in secondary school I started going. And then, when... so when I was at school I did GCSE drama. And in the, in the performance element I got A star. So I got... and then I found out later on that in the performance element I didn't drop a mark. I got full marks.

**JC:** Wow! That's some achievement.

**James:** Erm, but I didn't get that on my actual paper because, erm, I didn't do any of the, I refused to do any of the written work. So I ended up getting like a B or something.

James' reflection speaks of the inflexibility currently baked into the inequitable examination system. A prospective 'A Star' student demoted to a 'B' through the inability of the system to accommodate their difference. However, James' passion for their subject is clear. Indeed, what came across during all of the interviews was that this was not something that the students fell into in lieu of having anything better to do. The students speak of an interest in the arts that drove each individual into finding places and spaces where this interest could be realised and nurtured. Training in the arts is something they have all actively pursued as active, dynamic and determined agents seeking out opportunities to perform and develop.

## **Student impressions of the theatre company**

There was broad agreement from all students when the conversation turned to their impressions of the theatre company and the opportunities that could be accessed there. Students told me that they felt at home within the theatre as well as acknowledging that it was a good place for them to continue their artistic development. Tink typifies the academy students response to starting the course when she said (Interview 2 lines 148-151):

"Then I came here and did, I think, the first term here. And I was a bit nervous and shy, but I gave it what I had, and I then realised that this, this feels right. This is where I belong."

When asked to define what made this sense of belonging she continued (Interview 2 lines 153-162):

"It's just getting the chance to express yourself in a way that you won't be judged, but you can still express yourself no matter what, what you're going through. Erm, and, you know, you don't have to worry about anything. And even if you are worried there's always someone there who you can talk to. Erm, and then there's always people telling you you can improve if, you know, even if you're self-doubting people are like: "Oh no you're not." And I think that after the first showcase I was like - I didn't go to sleep to be honest the night before - getting high praise from everyone and anyone. And, yeah, and ever since I arrived I've felt like this, this is my home. Like this is where I belong now."

For Tink the chance to 'express yourself' without fear of censure in an environment where she doesn't 'have to worry about anything' suggests that she views the theatre company as a supportive environment. This sense of belonging was corroborated by Bob during the second (Interview 2 lines 57-79) conversation that took place between us:

**Bob:** I got an introductory package to [name of theatre company] and got invited to watch [name of production] back in 2016. And then I think just from there that was when I started coming to open days and tasters. And throughout my time I did one YAFTA [theatre and screen acting course] taster and then I think I went straight to the [theatre name] auditions with [staff name]. And then from there, as soon as I got the phone call saying that I got accepted on the course, I was like: “My God! I just can’t believe it!” And it was just something that I really wanted to do. And, I didn’t want to do what any of me other friends were doing, where they were going to like, the same places where you see the same people after you graduate. I wanted to take a new road, and start a new chapter.

**JC:** And what were your first impressions? When you walked down the stairs and into the place?

**Bob:** My next home.

**JC:** Brilliant!

**Bob:** Yeah! My next home.

**JC:** And why? Why your next home?

**Bob:** Just because I got to meet a lot of new people. And mainly throughout my life I’ve always wanted to have the opportunity to work with new people, rather than work with the same ones.

As can be seen from the above extract there is an awareness on his behalf of the limited options available for learning disabled school leavers ('the same places where you see the same people'), and a desire to reject the familiar for the new ('I wanted to take a new road, and start a new chapter'). Like Tink, he too chooses describes the theatre company as a 'home'; a home that in the second extract (Interview 3 lines 88-99) contains what he has come to see as his 'family' and 'friends':

**Bob:** And I still say to myself I can't believe it's my fifth year here at [name of theatre]! And the last five years here I've just loved it so much. And especially the course, it's really took it to another level.

**JC:** Well two things. First of all, what have you loved so much about [name of theatre company] and secondly what do you mean by 'another level'?

**Bob:** So what's happened to me over the last five years... I've just grown and made so many new friends and family. I think that's always been key for me. The more new people you meet on the daily basis in different subjects, the more you can grow as an individual if you want to get into the arts. And then hopefully plan a tour as well. And I've always found working collaboratively with new people gets you that insight into how you can grow as an individual and in the arts industry.

This sense of 'home' is combined with an opportunity to collaborate with 'new people' and points at Bob describing the theatre company as being a familiar and secure space ('home') which nevertheless still offers him a chance to grow and develop ('opportunity to work with new people') in his chosen sphere.

Tom also touched on the accommodating, welcoming environment that helped him to transition from college (Interview 2, lines 102 -115) after I asked him about what had made him want to train at the theatre:

**Tom:** I was at college and I kind of felt that college went on longer than it needed to. So the lockdown was a good opportunity to move me from college to, erm, to here. 'Cos of course that's where I started off doing, doing YAFTA [a film and television course] every week.

**JC:** So it was a place you knew, a place where you felt comfortable.



**Tom:** It was a place that I knew. A place where all the staff knew me. A place kind of where even though it was a one day, a once a week Friday course, it was something that I enjoyed and loved doing.

**JC:** A highlight in your week?

**Tom:** Well it kind of was I suppose. 'Cos I kind of knew that if it was Friday I've got it, and I've made it through another week of college! And also I can do the things that I enjoy and kind of wanted to do. So it was very much a place that I knew and, er, as you say, felt comfortable with and definitely enjoyed.

There is the suggestion that the training he was engaged with at college didn't match his needs; his use of the phrase 'made it through' suggesting that it was something to be endured rather than savoured. There is also a sense, contained within the phrase 'I kind of felt it went on longer than it needed to' of Tom's voice not being heard. A suggestion that his desires and wishes were not acceded to, that someone else knew better than Tom what form his training and development should assume. Using Tink's terminology, the move to the theatre company, a place he 'felt comfortable with and definitely enjoyed', seems to have allowed him to 'express' himself.

The is sense of feeling comfortable in the space of the theatre was also picked up by James who commented on the contrast he had experienced between the environment he discovered at the theatre in comparison to other training providers he had visited (Interview 2, lines 125-147):

**James:** And then from there in my third year, no before my third year, Mum found out about [name of theatre company]. And we came to an open day. And I was really unsure because I'd been to other open days and this wasn't an open day like any other.

**JC:** In what sense?

**James:** It was more... everyone was a lot more friendly! And it was, it kind of drew me to it. But also I was like: "Oh" because I'd been to [name of drama school] to go and see their open day. I'd been to see [name of drama school] and their open day, and then I came to [name of theatre company] to see their open day.

**JC:** Compare and contrast them for me if you can.

**James:** Well they were very different. Very, very different. So [name of drama school] was scary. Like because you walked in... and we saw some of their day what they... and it's very different from here. It's like very...erm, very like: "You must do this, you must do that. And you must do this." Which for me, with my PDA [Pathological Demand Avoidance Syndrome] just goes: "No!" And I switch off. I switch off immediately. And I'm taken back to school and I'm like: "Nope". It's like my fight or flight kind of thing. And then, erm, in my third year in [name of post 16 college] I came here one day a week on Mondays to see like, to see and be around and enjoy. 'Cos Mondays was theatre. And it was really cool. It was a really nice way into it.

For James the fact that 'everyone was a lot more friendly' proved to be an important factor in his decision first to access the theatre once a week on a Monday before ultimately signing up onto the Academy course.

The overarching sentiment of the students, though, is possibly most succinctly put by Bryan (Interview 3, lines 2-6) when he states:

"I'm enjoying it and... to be honest since I've been coming to [name of theatre] I feel very happy here, and feel like... I am somewhere where I am progressing, like I want to... like I want to be a professional actor. I feel like I am somewhere that, er, I am progressing and can help me, like, to get where I'm going."

When talking with the Director of the Performance Academy (DPA interview lines 570-580), she shared why she believes the company is able to work successfully with the individuals who enter the theatre:

"I think we're so individually focussed... we're so - every student, every artist is an individual - so they're not, you... they might come in a group, might work in a group all the time, but the journey we've been on with them, we meet them as an individual. They have an access needs assessment at the beginning, which is where we just find out everything about them: "How do you communicate? What do you like, what don't you like?" So, we have this like picture of them before they even start. And I think because our work is, is an individual approach, like our aim is - that person wants to get here - and that's our job to support them. There's just a million different, like journeys, of us all kind of going: "That person needs that, and that person needs that."

This access needs assessment seems to function like the working interviews identified by (Grover and Piggott 2015) or the support suggested by Beyer (2020) as indicators of increased probability for success for learning disabled entering new training/employment. By taking time to personalise the training experience they can fit the training to the trainee, rather than the trainee being expected to fit into the training program. Rather than a one size fits all approach there is the recognition that there are 'a million different' 'journeys' that students may want to take to reach their final destination. In the next section I shall share some of these journeys by sharing how the students themselves talk about their creative work.

## Creative work

In this section I will illustrate how this sense of belonging is providing an opportunity for the students to train and develop as artists. In them we talked about a piece of their art. It was work that had been filmed as part of their ongoing assessment by the theatre company and was used by the company to provide evidence for the university that was accrediting the course. The format was the same for each student: after watching each piece I would begin by asking why they wanted to share the particular piece with me, before moving on to questioning individuals about the inspiration for the piece and the craft involved in developing and shaping it.

As the extracts show, the students' responses reveal that they are heavily invested in their artistic work. They are not tinkering around the edges, rather dedicating themselves to developing as artists. The work, and the craft involved in developing and performing their work seems of deep importance to them. They seem to be constantly engaged in critically reflecting upon how they may improve their creative practice.

This desire to share newly gained technical proficiency lay behind Tom's choice - a short piano composition (Interview 1, lines 3-10)

**Tom:** I felt it was erm, a, er, a kind of interesting, er, musical piece which really, er, shows off all my, er, keyboard skills.

**JC:** OK fantastic, and, so, the thing that you like about it is the fact that it's... what in particular? What keyboard skills are you demonstrating?

**Tom:** Kind of how to erm, er, find the note 'C' on, er, the keyboard and also how to go up and down the keyboard. But mainly to, how, how to find and play the, the note 'C'.

Tom continued (Interview 1, lines 22-32) by explaining the genesis of the work:

"I suppose you just kind of have a... er...er idea and you just sort of, like with all creative things, you sort of you have an idea in your head and you think: "Oh maybe this is gonna work!" Or, or... and then you sort of try and work out the notes and where to, where to er, place the notes... and obviously put them in the right place! And then, and then you've got to then think of a tune... and a melody, and sort of go with that. And then sort of move on from, from, from there really. But really it just sort of comes from an idea, and with the right help and the right support, just how you're gonna work on that idea and then move that idea forward."

His words reveal the sustained effort and collaboration that had gone into crafting his piece. From the initial 'idea', 'a tune... and a melody' suggested themselves and then, 'with the right help and the right support', he was able to complete the piece that he shared with me.

Bob's motivation for sharing his guitar piece seemed to be twofold. Firstly, pride in the piece he had created, but also to recognise the important part two of the theatre company's tutors had played by collaborating with him (Interview 1, lines 4-28):

**Bob:** So I wanted to share this piece for two reasons. Erm, one it's the one I've done the most work on and the most I've improved throughout my ten years as a guitarist. And just after reading the results of my assessment criteria with [staff name] how I got excelling in my music results, and also pretty much how I was one of the only students who chose to create four new sections before going back to the original one. Whereas everyone else chose two. 'Cos I wanted to push myself to the absolute limit with this piece.

But then the second one... it is really important to me this piece because it's the last piece of music material that I made before [staff name] went off to New Zealand.

**JC:** Oh right. And why's that important?

**Bob:** Well to be honest it was 'cos before [staff name], who's, erm, [staff name] replacement, his step in before he comes back. Before [staff name] came to [name of theatre] just to kind of step in for him while he's away, erm, me and [staff name] originally started this just on two electric guitars we did. And then as soon as we started developing it we got towards the solo bit. But then soon as he left... just for a little bit, and before I got introduced to [staff name], I was a little bit... erm off at first because I didn't know how music was gonna work, right, 'cos he's been one of the closest members of staff I've been close to throughout my five years here.

**JC:** Right.

**Bob:** And as soon as I said to [staff name]: "You up for jamming a bit of bass guitar on my piece?" And then as soon as we started doing it and I noticed he could play I was like: "OK, I think I've got my man here just to help me create this piece!"

His statement that he has 'got my man here' suggests that, for Bob, the correct support is in place for him to realise his creative ambitions. Additionally, this comfort in his surroundings lies behind his ability to push himself to the 'absolute limit' whilst completing his piece.

The sense of stretching oneself to produce new work, was echoed by Bryan (Interview 1, lines 36-48) who shared that the genesis for his synthesiser piece had come from conversations with his music tutors:

**Bryan:** You know I did four compositions and they were all very different. And this is my third composition. And... I was just experimenting. And I remember, I think, [staff name] and [staff

name] said: “You can try, you don’t just have to stay on piano, be more creative.” And I was exploring different tunes. And then I found that tune, theatre, I thought: “Oh I like that! That sounds nice.” So, and then I, originally I did that without the backing track, but then [staff name] and [staff name] said that you could try it with a backing track and I thought: “OK! Now this looks really more interesting. And also...”

**JC:** What did you find more interesting about it?

**Bryan:** It sounded a lot more interesting than just a piano. Like, it’s not just a piano.

What comes across in all the above sections is the space and latitude given to the students to create their work. Bryan talks of 'exploring different tunes' (line 40 above), whilst Bob talks of 'developing' his guitar composition. There is a sense of individuals being able to take their work in the direction that they wish it to take, rather than having others decide for them.

The only student not to choose an original piece of work to discuss was James. Instead, he chose a Shakespearean dialogue taken from *Twelfth Night*. When I asked about this choice, he replied that he had wanted to share it because he believed that it highlighted the fact that the training he was receiving at the theatre company was commensurate with students training at other institutions (Interview 1, lines 27-33):

"I like the scene because it’s, erm... before we started doing the level 4, I found it quite... easy and quite frustrating because... it wasn’t the level I wanted it to be. And then when we started doing the level 4... he said we were gonna do Shakespeare and I was like: “Yes!” Because, one, I really like Shakespeare and, two, that’s what you do at like... that kind of level. And that’s the level I wanted it to be at. So yeah."

This idea of 'the level', or a standard for their work that is comparative to other drama/dance/music students is clearly something that the students are dedicated to attaining. The students spoke of being pushed to experiment in order to produce works which they consider both experimental and interesting. Across all interviews with the students a similar tale was told of the effort individuals had gone to to craft work to the best of their abilities. What we see through their words, I believe, is a long term dedication to the arts and a resolve to progress within their particular speciality.

### **Tink and the act of 'proving science wrong'**

One informant, Tink, chose a piece that upon my first viewing appeared unusual. Unusual because whereas the other students had all chosen pieces in which they appeared front and centre, Tink's film showed her dancing and playing a minor supporting role to another student's monologue. Intrigued, I asked her why she had chosen it and she replied (Interview 1, lines 22-29):

“Erm, so with the theatre piece I really wanted to push and challenge myself out of my comfort zone. And that was one of my goals for the beginning of last term. Erm, and because when I was younger I was diagnosed with Arthritis and got told quite a lot that”  
“You can't do these really big, excessive movements. And you can't do certain things because it'll... mash up your body, and your Arthritis will get in the way, and all that. So I kind of wanted to... prove science wrong!”

Pratt defines the second process at play in the Contact Zone, Autoethnography as a form in which:

"people undertake to describe themselves in ways that engage with representations others have made of them." (1991, p35)



As I suggested earlier, I believe that processes of governmentality produce representations of learning disability that focus on limitation and inability. Conceptions that I believe I witnessed being challenged during the interviews with the students in the performance academy. For Pratt autoethnographic events do not occur in a vacuum. Rather they occur 'in response to or in dialogue with' (1991, p35) events produced by the dominant factions of society.

In this case, the iteration of the dominant faction identified by Tink is Science. Science informed Tink of her Arthritis, a corporeal fact, but then, in her opinion, overreached its remit by handing down a paternalistic judgement on a sanctioned mode of life (shorn of excessive movements) that seems to have sat uneasily with Tink because she continues (interview 1, lines 40-48:

“I think I was like, as the weeks got on and the more like, and also I was getting all this negativity... for my condition, it was just like, “Right! I can do something here!” I can really just prove everyone and science wrong, and actually go out of my comfort zone to make something great. So and then, so, I was doing that piece, that movement, over and over again, even at home, to the point where my Mum went: “Aren’t you afraid? Are you actually gonna hurt yourself?” And I was just like: “Meh!” Then I just kept on going.”

Her diagnosis and designation as someone precluded from making ‘excessive movements’ seems initially to have constrained what she felt able to achieve. But according to Tink's testimony this seems to have created an internal tension and dissonance that led eventually to a moment of reassessment - the ‘Right I can do something here!’ It is important to note, with regards to my notion of the possibility of learning disability, that this moment was driven by Tink alone. Moreover, the liberation attached to the recognition of the ability to move excessively seems to have been intoxicating, illustrated I believe, by the phrase “I was doing that piece, that movement over and over” to the point where it brings

her into conflict with her mother: the 'Aren't you afraid? Are you actually gonna hurt yourself?' Tink's pithy and humorous reply "Meh!" suggest an internal evaluation of the relative merits of sore bones vs the joy of allowing her body to move artistically in a manner that is not bureaucratically sanctioned.

Tink's testimony reminds me again of the words of the disabled artist Bonnie Klein ('to give permission to the artist in your body is an outrageous act of defiance.' 2002, p41') As Tink herself noted (Interview 1 lines 51-53):

"when people see me they don't really think I can play anything, or I can, like, sing or do any type of art form really."

I believe that what we are seeing within this shared narrative is Tink's autoethnographic act of speaking and dancing into existence of a new Tink. This is an act of self creation born directly from defying (and I'm back to Pratt here) representations others have made of her. In Foucauldian terms it is an act of Parrhēsia, because it defiantly speaks out against a diagnosis, an act that is never without peril for a learning disabled person. As an ally of people with learning disabilities I find this act of defiance, this re-writing of the self, exhilarating. It takes real courage for Tink to right her perceived wrongs. Again, in Foucauldian terms it is an example of fiction (the creation of a piece of art by a learning disabled artist) that 'fictions history'. It undermines underlying notions that a medical governmentality, as enacted by clinicians, somehow knows the learning disabled individual better than the individual themselves. Science told Tink not to dance as it objectified and categorised her as a young learning disabled woman with Arthritis. For science it was too risky for her to dance. Tink wittily answered science with a 'Meh' that demonstrates both her subjectivity and agency to choose the form of life (filled with 'excessive movements') that she wishes to lead.

Ultimately, the Contact Zone in which this happened was the one created by the theatre company. It provided both the support and the possibility of engagement with training that is meaningful to her. This seems to have offered Tink both the space and the agency to independently reassess how she can operate upon the world, and resulted in a remaking and remodelling of her worldview. In the final reckoning it suggests, I believe, the importance of ensuring that similar opportunities are available to all young people with learning disabilities so that they may have the chance to do the same.

#### **Scene 4 - Jackson and Old Major**

When Jackson first introduced himself to me, I felt the frisson of excitement that arises in the modern world when we suddenly find ourselves face to face with someone previously seen only on our ubiquitous screens. I noted my nerves at meeting, for want of a better word, someone *famous*. Whilst researching the theatre group, I had visited their website numerous times, watching and rewatching their oeuvre, reading and rereading their mission statements and scrolling through the '*our people*' section of the website, attempting to commit names to faces (my Achilles heel) and genning up on people's CVs.

Reading Jackson's entry had made me feel both an underachiever and more than slightly envious. Over his twenty years with the company, he had been at the front and centre of numerous productions, both as an actor and deviser of theatre; for instance, a road trip across America on the back of a Harley Davidson was used as the raw materials to create a show that had toured nationally and internationally. He was fêted as being 'the mastermind behind some of the company's most successful productions', and his bio also reported that he had seen his work performed at the 2012 cultural Olympiad. Finally, in what seemed like an incidental throwaway, it also revealed that he had also won the Eurovision Song Contest for Disabled People back in the early 2000's. The extent to which he is both admired and respected within the company is aptly demonstrated by a

jokey comment one of the support staff shared when I was talking about his achievements. 'I know,' he replied mock wearily 'It's like, *come on Jackson! Leave something for the rest of us!*' before adding 'He's ridiculously talented.'

The company website had allowed me to view several promotional showcase shorts that confirmed this assertion: whether bursting onto the stage in a light infantry vehicle, suitably attired to play the part of a blustering tank commander at a loss as how to deal with a 30 foot tall baby, or high in the hills with his band shooting the video for his latest song, Jackson's artistic ability and scope of his skills were clear. Writer, performer, musician - a veritable triple threat.

He approached me affably and initiated a conversation, asking who I was and what were my reasons for being at the project. For my part, I pointed to one of the large professional photographs that adorn the central space of the project. It was an arty shot of Jackson and his band: an archetypal band photo set in a quirky location with all members sat in a line looking confidently straight into the lens - apart from the one who was looking moodily away towards the middle distance. I said I was interested in finding about the processes that allow projects like the band to germinate and develop at the project. He responded by telling me about his involvement with the company and finished by sketching out for me the details of a new piece he was applying for funding to realise and tour. Talking to Jackson revealed a world of possibility, of what can be done and achieved by artists with learning disabilities, if the correct environment can be nurtured and maintained. Of the capacity he has to create, connect and communicate his experience using his artistic skills.

One clear example of this occurred during the first days of my observations at the project. I had spent the day with the artists who were engaged in a devising workshop, creating new work for an upcoming showcase. Small groups had broken out after the communal warm ups, and I had spent the morning watching

dedicated, hardworking actors, working collaboratively running and rerunning through the action contained within their pieces.

The group broke for lunch and all ate together heartily, the majority eschewing the opportunity to eat at the tables at the end of the room, instead sitting on the floor as if enjoying an indoor picnic. As the newcomer, still unaware of the routine of the group, and still feeling slightly out of place, I'd made the mistake of walking over to the tables but, finding myself alone, and wishing to begin to build rapport with staff and artists, I grabbed my chair and positioned it at the edge of the circle. In doing so, I realised I'd made myself doubly awkward as I now could neither eat my own lunch with dignity, nor connect with the group on the floor.

Whilst pondering my next move, I heard a scrape of chair legs across the floor and turned to see Jackson dragging a chair my way. I am not sure whether he sensed my discomfort, or just wanted to talk, but either way he came and struck up a conversation. We talked about his mornings work devising new art, and the challenges of creating work and collaborating with others to realise ideas. The topic of conversation then moved on to a showreel he was creating (the short visual C.V's that actors compile to send to casting agents, directors etc. to exhibit their range of abilities), and the importance of choosing suitable pieces for it.

There was a natural pause in our conversation, and I looked away to finish the rest of my precariously balanced lunch when, without warning Jackson began to talk in a low, yet clear and assured voice. He began:

“Now, comrades, what is the nature of this life of ours?”

and the words rang familiar, yet not yet readily placed by my mind. He paused, momentarily before continuing:

“Let us face it: our lives are miserable, laborious, and short. We are born, we are given just so much food as will keep the breath in our bodies, and those of us who are capable of it are forced to work to the last atom of our strength; and the very instant that our usefulness has come to an end we are slaughtered with hideous cruelty. No animal in England knows the meaning of happiness or leisure after he is a year old. No animal in England is free. The life of an animal is misery and slavery: that is the plain truth.”

By now I was looking at him, electrified, having placed the piece as Old Majors’ monologue in Orwell’s *Animal Farm* (1945). Jackson’s oration was not a mechanical rendition but something that was considered and delivered with passion, craft and professionalism. Jackson had clearly thought about the words, and was using his artistic talent to render them as impactful as possible as he delivered them to his audience of one.

His voice, which had started low, yet self-assured, began to swell as he warmed to his theme. He continued:

“But is this simply part of the order of nature? Is it because this land of ours is so poor that it cannot afford a decent life to those who dwell upon it? No, comrades, a thousand times no! The soil of England is fertile, its climate is good, it is capable of affording food in abundance to an enormously greater number of animals than now inhabit it. This single farm of ours would support a dozen horses, twenty cows, hundreds of sheep - and all of them living in a comfort and a dignity that are now almost beyond our imagining. Why then do we continue in this miserable condition?”

From his delivery, it was clear Jackson understood Orwell’s aims within this passage, and was able to dial into the requisite emotions that give the piece its dramatic power. Around us, people went on with their lunch, some lying flat on

their backs on the floor in a chip coma. I was spellbound. Building to a crescendo Jackson/Old Major continued and answered the rhetorical question of the 'miserable condition':

“Because nearly the whole of the produce of our labour is stolen from us by human beings. There, comrades, is the answer to all our problems. It is summed up in a single word. Man. Man is the only real enemy we have. Remove Man from the scene, and the root cause of hunger and overwork is abolished for ever.”

Jackson finished his oration, broke from character, looked me squarely in the eye and said, with clear feeling: 'I love Major's speech. I *really* love it.' I too am an admirer of Orwell's work, but I was too deeply affected by what I'd just heard (this was art at its intoxicating and inspiring best), and only managed to mumble some inane platitudes. Jackson listened politely to them, before excusing himself to the far corner of the room, and I observed him quietly rehearsing and re-working the monologue, trying out different parts with different emphasis, in an attempt to polish and perfect the piece. Everybody else continued with their lunch as I attempted to comprehend what I had seen. The lines from Auden's *Musee des Beaux Arts* (1938) sprang to mind:

'About suffering they were never wrong,  
The old Masters: how well they understood  
its human position: how it takes place  
while someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking  
dully along.'

Jackson, like his fellow 'old masters' Breughel and Auden, was busy painting his own picture of suffering. Jackson had shared his particular image, and I reflect now on my good fortune to be present as a technically and artistically adept performer shared a piece of drama that clearly resonated with them ('I love Major's speech'). Jackson was word perfect and keenly attuned to Orwell's underlying

ethos; that the material conditions of everyday people in Great Britain are imperilled by the inequity that is baked into our socio-economic systems. The context in which it appeared mirrors Auden's poem too. The monologue of suffering was delivered with dramatic élan whilst I was fighting with my lunch; I was that 'someone else is eating' as Jackson worked through Old Major's address.

But to me, a disability studies student, it resonated deeply on an additional level. Indian aesthetics introduces the idea of the *sahridaya* - the sensitive spectator - as one who is able to identify with the intended meanings/emotions/intentions transmitted by an artist in any given piece of work. In this encounter, with my employment background supporting learning disabled students and adults, and my current role as a disability studies scholar, Jackson's craft transformed me into a *sahridaya*. Specifically, Jackson's oration spoke to my understanding about the treatment of people with learning disabilities by the ableist majority. Of how they are routinely positioned and spoken of in derogatory terms that objectifies and renders them as somehow sub-human and animalistic. Of how exclusion from mainstream society, and the vagaries of the workfare state, mean that many learning disabled lives are 'miserable, laborious and short'. That the everyday experience of many people with learning disabilities is not 'simply part of the order of nature', (mirroring Barthes assertion that myth 'transforms history into nature' 2009, p154) but rather the direct result of [the] 'man', as encountered by individuals with learning disabilities during their ongoing interactions with the state institutions. These often profess to hold the best interests of learning disabled people at heart, whilst simultaneously truncating and delimiting the lives that learning disabled people are allowed to lead.

Set against this, Jackson's performance worked to confound many of the myths that continue to constrain people with learning disabilities. What, though, does it confound? I would suggest that it contests false notions that learning



disabled people can't be technical or precise. That learning disabled people can't learn complex things. That learning disabled people are somehow unable to experience and feel the human condition, or convey complex arguments that challenge lazy and orthodox thinking. That learning disabled people are passive and apolitical: objects to be administered to rather than subjects with exciting ideas about what a future society may become.

But Jackson, like Old Major, does not want pity. His overt statement of his regard for the piece suggests that, like Old Major, he simply wants to have his concerns heard, and to transmit his sense of injustice to his audience. Additionally, I experienced the monologue as an incarnation of Foucault's suggestion that it may be possible to fiction history in order to challenge and undermine the status quo, whilst simultaneously laying the foundations for what is to follow ('One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth.' 1980, p193), ultimately revealing the possibility of new futures. Jackson co-opted a classic piece of literature, and by virtue of who he is, added to my understanding of the work and the world beyond. He reminded me that the material conditions of everyday existence for many learning disabled people are infused, in the words of Old Major, with 'hideous cruelty'. But the passion of his delivery provided succour to this *sahridaya*. In its dignity and defiance I heard a resistance and rejection of these current conditions. A call to action ('Remove man from the scene'), an insistence that learning disabled people must be freed from Titchkosky's 'bureaucratic order' and involved and consulted, rather than directed and administered, on all aspects of their lives.

With reference to The Contact Zone, Jackson's monologue acted at once as an act of transculturation (the act of taking what is handed down, in this case Orwell's words, and transforming it to alternative conceptions), and an act of autoethnography (Jackson's proficiency at delivering the monologue defiantly

speaking and reaffirming to both Jackson and his audience of the existence of a proficient and capable artist). Orwell's intention in the piece seems to have been a reflection on the unequal relationship between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, but Jackson's rendition and the élan with which it was delivered added a new layer to those familiar words, transforming them forever in my mind.

Finally, what is notable is that the remarkable in this particular creative environment was, well, unremarkable. At the end of *Musee des Beaux Arts* Auden writes:

“the sun shone  
As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green  
Water, and the expensive, delicate ship that must have seen  
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,  
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.”

These words stay with me as I think back to my experience of watching Jackson's monologue. Similarly, Jackson's peers and the staff in the room must have heard his rendition. They too 'must have seen something amazing', but the difference is that for them (unlike myself) the 'amazing' was unremarkable. Unremarkable because that is just what seems to go on within the rehearsal spaces of this theatre company. Professional theatre is created with technical proficiency on a daily basis. Theatre that simultaneously speaks for and to learning disabled people and society at large.

As he delivered his monologue, the other actors and staff were finishing their lunch and were preparing to re-engage with their own artistic impulses: their own 'somewhere to get to'. It is only to outsiders, like myself, new to the action, that the events would seem startling. In Breughel's *Icarus*, a boy is always falling from the sky: within this space people with learning disabilities are always creating, rehearsing and performing art to a professional standard. It's just what

happens in this particular space. Atkinson (2006) refers to the 'everyday arias' that he witnessed whilst conducting an ethnography of the Welsh National Opera. The sense of the mundane and the extraordinary being held within the same location, with the latter emanating from the dedicated and repeated craft of the former. It seems to me that I witnessed the same.

## **Creative Futures**

In the final conversation with each student, I asked each individual to reflect on the training they had received so far, its impact on their development, and how they believed it would help them to attain future goals. My intention here was to allow space for the students to articulate the importance of this particular training program for their personal development and to contextualise its place in their future plans. As the following excerpts show, there was broad agreement from the students that they had undoubtedly developed on a personal and professional level across the course of their training. They also spoke directly of the autonomy their training had inculcated in them, which I shall argue infers a deep institutional conviction in the students capabilities. Ultimately, their training has instilled a sense of belief that appears to have informed the future aspirations of the group which can neatly be summarised by Tink's declaration of her intention 'to go big or go home!'

## **Student development during training**

All of the students were keen to share with me the fact that, in their opinion, they had progressed across the course of the Performance Academy program. During our conversations, each shared with me both their appraisal of their development and identified the reason for their development. Bob (Interview 3, lines 63-77) when asked about how his skills had developed said:

"Oh well they've definitely excelled at a level I never, I never thought I would expect in my wildest dreams by being at [name of

theatre]. Because when I first came here I barely knew what texts or dialogue was. Or what drama was. 'Cos I never experienced drama that much... I never really... And dance and music I pretty much enjoyed learning how they would run sessions and also how they can open up other students opportunities to give them the opportunity of what they can expect and of what they want to achieve in their future. Training here at [name of theatre] ... which I've loved so much... just having a blast here with the team which I love so much as well. And the training has really, really helped it has. And it's got me to a stage on my life where I can see myself doing something like this as a seeable future. Er, for like for different companies... I might work within theatre, dance or music."

He details how he's had a 'blast' whilst receiving a grounding in skills that has allowed him to perceive a 'seeable' future working for 'different companies'.

When Tom talked about the skills that he had acquired so far (Interview 3, lines 54-64) he chose to talk about it in technical terms:

I think my skills have developed a lot from when I joined the company. Particularly this course because there's so much content on this course. You know you're looking at so many different things, be it physical theatre, your own choreography, whether it be film music. And you're kind of learning stuff that you probably would never, erm, would have never have known had you not come on this course. Erm, like before this course I didn't know what a leitmotif was! So I now know what a leitmotif is. And before this course I didn't know what Comedia dell'arte was. I know what... so you're learning stuff that I wouldn't have known had I not been on this course.

His easy, familiar referencing of 'physical theatre', 'choreography', 'Comedia dell'arte' and 'leitmotif' speak of a training program that is comprehensive and technical, and a training provider with conviction in the potential of the students enrolled upon its course. Indeed, he notes that there is 'so much content' on the Academy course. This suggests a program that is not trying to contain its students in a holding pattern (as he alluded to earlier) but rather provide a broad theatrical training commensurate with training available to non-disabled students.

For Tink (Interview 3, lines 57-86), the development seem to have been as much personal and professional leading to a change in how she thinks not only about the arts, but the wider world in general:

**Tink:** Erm, I feel like being at [name of theatre] has changed my perspective on a whole lot of things outside. 'Cos like anyone I meet, like who's related, not related to me, but like friends of mine, they're like: "Oh my God! Like you going to uni's proper changed, you've proper changed." I'm like: "In a good way?! In a bad way?! Oh my God!" But no, it's like how I look at things now it's like... if I was to go outside... well before I came here I would just think: "Oh that's just another building." But now I can see the history that's in that building. And I'm not... it's weird, but I can think what it used to look like before it got burned down. So I'm more intrigued to learn more things now than I was before. Erm, and my taste in music has gone off the charts. 'Cos I, I really don't get any spare time, but when I do get those little moments... I just learn more and more about like music or theatre or dance or whatever I need to do I just find a book and just read it. And I'm just like: "Oh this makes so much sense." So now I'm currently learning how to read sheet music. 'Cos I can't read sheet music yet...

**JC:** And how's that coming along?

**Tink:** It's really good because when a song comes on the radio, I can identify what keys are being played to that song that's on the radio. And then when I say to my mum, my mum's like: "What? What are you on about?" And I'm like: "Well, well they're playing it in 'C' or 'B'." And she doesn't have a clue what I'm on about! She's like: "OK, OK. Just sing the song!"

**JC:** You seem to be describing a general interest in the arts that has developed during your time here...

**Tink:** Yes

**JC:** And are there any other skills you can identify?

**Tink:** I feel like the module we've just done with the dell'arte characters, erm, in theatre... well I was saying it this morning's well. Once you identify the characters in dell'arte, I can see them on a everyday basis now. I was just saying to my mum as we were walking down: "I saw three in this person today!" And she was like: "Which ones? The vain one? the selfish one?"

According to Tink, her training has not only led to a development of her artistic sensibilities ('when a song comes on the radio I can identify what keys are being played') but has also provided her with a new theoretical lens through which to interpret the world ('Once you identify the characters in dell'arte, I can see them on a everyday basis now'), as well as making her more engaged with the world around her ("But now I can see the history that's in that building"). This speaks of a training program that is matching both her needs and interests, whilst simultaneously opening up new vistas. A training program that is engaging Tink and is facilitating her development.

This sentiment of personal development springing from the professional training is echoed by James (Interview 3, lines 70-96):

**James:** I think I've developed massively. I wouldn't, I wouldn't be able to stay in the room for very long when I first came here. I'd

get, like, really distracted, or really bored... like really, like... sorry... and like, erm, I, I struggle with voices in my head so like I would fixate on them too much. And then I'd kind of like... I'd kind of like just walk out and then... and I still do occasionally but it's a lot less... like it's completely a lot less than it was. And I think going on from that, I think that what I want to do when I leave here, I think, is why I stay in more. So I think I've developed massively. Erm, you know like, I'll just give an example, like my singing. I was a good singer before but now... but my timing was all like off, and it, it wasn't there and I couldn't... like they would have to play the music around me. But it's starting to get a lot better. And my keyboard skills, piano skills, have got a lot better. Erm, my dance has got a lot better, like at least ninety percent better. So yeah.

**JC:** So overall you see progression?

**GT:** Yeah definitely. And it's nice because, like, when you actually sit down and think about how much I've changed in a year and a half...

**JC:** And how do you think you've changed?

**GT:** I'm a lot more like... I dunno... like my mentality's changed. Like for example, like, it's, it's a difficult one because my mentality I thought at the time was good, and then I look back and it wasn't. Like I'd be like: "Oh I can do it now, so why can't I go and do something else because I can already do it?" But actually I've learnt life skills here, and being, like, more open to, like, people with disabilities. Like because it's, it's difficult because like you put seven of us in a room, it's genuinely quite difficult... but learning how to cope with that... you're gonna have to for the rest of your life so...

According to James' testimony, engaging in training that is both meaningful and challenging to James has enabled him to develop personally ('I've learnt life skills here'). At the outset James states that he 'wouldn't be able to stay in the room for very long' before referencing later in the excerpt that he is able to now because

his 'mentality's changed'. James reflects that the experience of being part of this particular training group and training program caused him to become more accommodating and understanding of difference. Alongside this personal development James talks of gaining increased proficiency in dance, singing, keyboard and piano skills which again speaks of a comprehensive and challenging training program that is working hard to develop the next generation of learning disabled artists.

Finally, Bryan framed his development with reference to an ability to engage with assessment (interview 3 lines 115-143):

**Bryan:** Thinking about it I feel a lot because, er, when I started this course I wasn't really sure how was it gonna go really. Because this was my first time doing full time because originally I only came here part time. And now doing full time I wasn't really sure... how it was gonna go. And I just went along with it, and then when we were told about assessments I know that everyone was really frightened like... but for me I was like... no I just wanted to see what it was like, like... just go in see what it's like and then when another assessment... you're like: "OK now I know what it's like now. I know what to do." So I was like, for assessments, I was like I just wanna see what it's like. If I'm, if I did rubbish then, OK, then maybe next time I could learn from the approach of an assessment...

**JC:** So if you got an 'Improving' or 'Achieving' you can move towards...

**Bryan:** And I have to say I've definitely improved, I've definitely improved because I started...when I started I got theatre was 'Excelling' and dance and music was 'Achieving' 'Improving', but since then

**HLS:** Year one you got 'Excelling' across the board!

**JC:** Oh really! I thought, I thought, I thought it was... I knew I got 'Excelling' in theatre, but the other two music and dance I got...



**HLS:** No, that was this term. So, like, in year one I'm sure you got 'Excelling'

**Bryan:** Oh right. 'Cos I thought... I knew I got...

**HLS:** No you got 'Excelling' Bryan.

**JC:** And what does it feel like when you are hitting those levels?

**Bryan:** At first I'm like: "Really?" Because you know when you do something and you're like: "Is there something I should have done?" Like you do feel, like, a regret like: "I should have done much..." even like, yesterday, like we did the theatre assessment and I'm thinking: "Is there something I should have done? Did I miss anything out? Or is there something I should have improved?" But I did what I did, and... I feel like I did what I did. And I went in with commitment and I knew what to do and so...

Earlier on in the chapter I shared an extract from a conversation with Bryan where he spoke of his catastrophic experience at school: he spoke of the 'severe abuse' he had been exposed to and how the learning environment seemed 'more prison' than school. His experience had left him regretting attending ('I felt I've wasted ten years in education for nothing'). However, his story of his experience at the theatre company is different. He started by relating his concern that he might not be able to meet the standards required of the course. It is clear through the short interaction with the Head of Learning and Support (HLS) at the theatre, that despite his (ongoing) doubts he is more than meeting the requirements of the course ('Year one you got 'Excelling' Across the board!'). In this environment, crucially, he is not failing, rather excelling, something that initially caused disbelief ('At first I'm like: 'Really?'), but as a result of the skills garnered became something he was able to achieve ('I went in with commitment and I knew what to do') and felt prepared and confident to do so. The difference between environments seems clear. In one he was ostracised and bullied, in another he was engaged and encouraged. It seems evident that the educational experience offered by the theatre was far more conducive for Bryan than his experience during his time within formal education. Indeed, the sentiments of the students as a whole revolve

around suggestions of 'development'. Enrolment on the course was described by all students in generally positive terms. This again speaks of a course that is matched to their interests and needs, and by doing so engenders an ongoing desire within the students to engage with the course. A process that matches Roulstone et al (2014) suggestions regarding the necessity of curating training, development and employment programs in a manner that predicates success

### **Bryan and The Contact Zone**

During my conversation with Bryan, it became clear that he saw his training as a potential escape route from his current role as an employee at *Home Bargains* - a national chain of budget stores with profits have rocketed in the wake of Austerity, Brexit, Covid and Trussonomics. His dislike of his current role is evinced, I believe, by the fact that he returned to the topic of hating his job on four separate occasions over the course of a conversation that according to my interview log lasted 20 minutes and 58 seconds. The topic first arises (Interview 3 lines 164-169) when he is reflecting upon the opportunity being offered to him by the theatre company to become one of their in house Artists upon the completion of his Performance Academy Course:

“To be honest it does feel like the same as when I was on part time and Melissa told me to go full time. You know it is a big decision but... it’s another big decision to make. But when I was on part time and I was working, I hated work. And I thought why not really, but then I got the feeling... would work let me go? Let me do it.”

Bryans antipathy to work ('I hated work') is followed by an acknowledgement of the hold that his current employer has over the choices may be allowed to make ('would work let me go?') that speaks to the universal bondage all employees experience once employed. As Weeks would suggest it is an instance of 'life against work' (2011, p236). Bryan returns to the topic of hating

work soon after (Interview 3, lines 175-181) when he is reflecting on what comes next for him after the Performance Academy course has ended:

“Well at the moment I just don’t wanna feel like I’ve done this course and then that’s it I’m just... I don’t, I don’t just wanna do like I’ve done this course and I’m going, like, back to work again because I just, I hate my work at the moment. I just hate work and I know [name of staff] and [name of staff] say: “Well that’s not gonna happen.” And, erm, there has been some talks of possibilities and, you know, some futures like, like join the Artists. And I feel like... you get to do projects and do shows and...”

He reveals that he is already worried about 'going, like, back to work again' after experiencing the 'possibilities' and 'futures' shown to him during his training. It seems as though he is contrasting his current positive experience at the theatre with the negative experience of working on the shopfloor at Home Bargains. This sense of not wanting to waste his training and fall back into his current employment is again overtly referenced (interview 3, lines 195-205):

"But I just don’t want to be like when I’ve done this course then there isn’t anything and I’m just gonna do work at Home Bargains. ‘Cos I hate it. And I’m in a situation where I’ve had enough of that job and I want to now progress. I want to be a professional actor. That’s what I want to do. And that’s what, that’s what I’m just feeling. I just don’t wanna feel like when I’ve done this course, that’s it and I’m just gonna work and do Home Bargains ‘cos I certainly don’t wanna do Home Bargains for the rest of my life. Because I only do it because, erm, to pay my fees for here. And also pay my rent and my travel and I don’t get... and I’m on PIP, which is Personal Independence Payment but I don’t get a lot ‘cos unfortunately the, erm, what I... they score you on certain levels..."

and is combined with an honest exposition of what has made him continue in his job to this point. The final comparison with his current state and the alluring possibilities that he sees opening up as a result of his current training are finally delivered at the end of the conversation (interview 3, lines 224-229) when he says:

“I just want to be a professional actor. That’s all I want to do. And that’s the main goal I want to do. I mean I’ve done theatre and, you know, I want to be like TV, film and stuff like that. I mean I’ve done student films and I’m working on a student film at the moment. That’s all I want to do. I just don’t want to live the nine to five job because I’ve done that and I hate it.”

I contest that Bryan’s testimony shows clearly that he understands what it is like to be panoptically surveilled by the state (‘they score you on certain levels’). To be a case instead of a person: objectified, scrutinised, assessed and accounted for. To be judged and to have judgement passed upon. To have a sanctioned mode of life (as a low paid worker at Home Bargains with a subsistence income topped up by meagre PIP payments). I like that he has had enough. I like his defiance that this state of affairs will not do and that he has, in terms of the Contact Zone, begun the autoethnographic act of rewriting the self from shop worker to stage actor. He is brave in his Parrhêsic assertion of his hatred for work, because in a conditional workfare state to be anything other than grateful and happy at accepting low paid, precarious work risks censure and sanction. However, his determination ‘to be a professional actor’ speaks of an individual attempting to ‘fiction history’, that is to bring about a state of affairs that does not as yet currently exist and by doing so challenge tired bureaucratic conceptions of what Bryan could achieve.

Bryan’s testimony elsewhere reveals him to be an industrious and resourceful individual. In our second interview he detailed at length the lengths he went to to access dramatic training and creative instruction in order to pursue

the career he wants, whilst simultaneously having to deal with the opprobrium of the DWP (Interview 2 lines 212-216):

**Bryan:** ...and at the same time I was still on Jobseeker's. And they weren't happy with what I was doing...

**JC:** Weren't they now?

**Bryan:** No but I felt... I said: "Look I'm getting out there. I'm not sitting at home job searching. I'm getting out there, getting experience."

In terms that the 'bureaucratic order' of the conditional workfare state may just understand, he should be understood as a 'striver' not a 'skiver'. It's just that what he is striving for, a creative future as a 'professional artist', does not fit in with the limited conceptions of the DWP regarding the capabilities of learning disabled school leavers. After leaving school he had sought out opportunities at local drama groups and theatres all the while holding down a job he disliked in order to satisfy the criteria set out for him by the DWP. This seems a clear instance of governmentality. A sense of the DWP decreeing what constitutes meaningful work - in this case badly remunerated, repetitive labour - that reveals succinctly both its attitude and aspiration for Bryan's future. Additionally, Bryan's words reveal that consideration for the desires of his employers ('would they let me do it?') had to be taken into account before he commenced full time at the theatre company.

Set against this jeopardy, though, are the ideas embedded within the excerpts above that add to my argument that the theatre company can reasonably be conceived as being a Contact Zone. One in which the roles, training and employment opportunities offered by ableist society can be questioned and rebuffed. Bryan's perception of the theatre company as a space of opportunity ('talks of possibilities and, you know, some futures like, like join the Artists. And I feel like... you get to do projects and do shows and... ') allows him, through an

instance of Parrhēsia – the courageous act of speaking truth to power – to make two bold auto ethnographic statements ('I hate work. I really do' & 'I just want to be a professional actor. That's all I want to do') that, when combined, constitute a powerful rewriting of the self.

Let me be clear, it is not work *per se* that he hates: anyone who has had the same opportunity as I have to observe his dedication to crafting, rehearsing, finessing and performing his work would be disavowed of this notion. No, it is the precarious, repetitive, poorly paid work that governmental agencies decree as his calling that is rejected. Bryan knows he is more than this. Having tried out the conditional workfare state and experienced first hand where the modern workplace would like to situate him, Bryan is clear in his disinterest in playing a part in his own subjugation. He has aspirations and a clear goal, that, in the light of the offer from the theatre company to become one of their 'Artists', is obviously within his capability.

As Weeks reminds us, work for so many (no matter how unsuited, degrading or damaging to the individual) has become, in modern times, something to be endured. A mythical, ethical obligation. Bryan's direct experience seems to have led to the personal revelation that what was prescribed did not constitute the sum total of its parts. That the contract offered (work hard for low pay and meagre benefits) was neither equitable nor inviting enough to match the ideas for his future that he had begun to imagine.

### **Control and Possibility**

What comes through in the transcripts and recordings is how the development of skills and the subsequent development of student aspirations seems to have been instigated by the approach of the theatre company to the training of the students. An approach that often cedes control of the development of each student's skills to the individual themselves. This action, of trusting in the

capabilities of each student to create their own works, was alluded to directly in my interviews with the drama and music tutors for the Performance Academy course (See previous chapter). These are merely expressions of the wider company ethos which is founded not in idealism, but reflection on the successful pieces of work that they have seen their artists develop, devise, produce and perform. Within the realm of the theatre company, the capability of learning disability is never in question because they have 34 years of seeing the artistic output of this capability.

For the students, this belief in their capability seems to be experienced in terms of the freedom and autonomy they are given to develop their own work. They feel trusted to create their own work. Tink, talking about a dance solo she created (Interview 3, lines 11-21), comments on what this felt like:

**Tink:** And then we came and did, for dance... it was a bit like: "Woah! You're letting me?" ... I think like for the first term back after holidays it was like you get more... control. Over your own things. So in dance you were doing, you were learning to do our own solos which... I never done a solo in my life! I mean I have performed one, but I've never done one before.

**JC:** And what was that like...being given that kind of...?

**Tink:** That responsibility? It was, erm, a bit overwhelming at first. I was... I remember questioning like myself, like: "Is this right? Do I do this? Do I..? What..? What do I..? Eh? I don't know what I'm doing!" So there was a lot of back and forth.

Her initial reaction to this 'control' over her own work seems to have been unnerving; she mentions that although she has in the past been handed a choreographed solo to perform, this was the first time that she had been asked to generate one herself. At the end of the excerpt, the purposely jumbled phrasing ('Do I..? What..? What do I..?' etc.) was delivered in a humorous manner that

seemed intended to dramatise the doubts she felt in the moment regarding her capability to execute the task. Continuing her story (Interview 3, lines 33-52):

**Tink:** I was kind of like... well from before I was like no one told me I couldn't do anything. I was like: "Right! I'm gonna go and be my free, be myself, be my true authentic self." So there you are. And it was... yeah... there was a lot of questions like: "Am I doing right? What do I need to add? Do I need to take anything away?"

**JC:** How do you answer those questions?

**Tink:** Exactly! So then I was like... I was asking: "Do I need to add or take?"...[inaudible]...so yeah... that, that whole... me being in control was one thing. But then someone telling you there's no right or wrong was like: "Oh my God! I'm in control here!" And I was petrified. But luckily I made a really nice solo at the end. So yeah.

**JC:** And I guess if you wanna go on and create, you've gotta learn that.

**Tink:** Yeah, yeah... I mean they're not wrong when they say, you know...responsibility is a big thing, 'cos... only I could create that. No-one else could create that for me.

**JC:** And what was it like being given that responsibility?

**Tink:** Erm... it's scary but it's also really... helpful for the future. 'Cos at least now, now I know that I can create a solo based over what I see. Like ten years ago if someone told me I had to create something I would probably have walked away to be honest. 'Cos like: "Nah!"

She develops a narrative that contrasts her previous inability to independently create artistic work ('I probably would have walked away') with a current situation in which she could ("I made a really nice solo in the end."). More than this, though, she identifies how this skill will be 'helpful for the future', which suggests a desire to continue producing artistic work safe in the knowledge that she has the requisite skills to independently execute it. The telling phrase to my



eye is 'based over what I see': I suggest that the implication here is that Tink, in an autoethnographic act, has rewritten the self. She had come to realise through the course of her training that not only is her artistic vision permitted, but that it is a valid mode of expression to be shared with others. Her experiences during her training are allowing Tink to discover her 'true authentic self', and suggest that the instinct of the theatre 'just to let them be who they are' is resulting in intriguing, positive outcomes.

This sense of beginning to act and create independently as an artist was also highlighted in Tom's thoughts on the dance solo he too had created (Interview 3 lines 69-87):

**Tom:** I kind of worked on solo pieces a bit this... maybe last term. Erm, but not so much this term. So it's been nice to be able to... you now... be given a solo piece to do. Maybe, you know, be given... bits of help and little bits of... but you know apart from that be able to be kind of able to take it to where I sort of want to take it. And it's nice as I was saying before to be given that freedom. Er, 'cos never in dance are you ever able to be given that freedom usually. If you're in dance and you're with a dance teacher they usually say: "Oh well you know I've got this dance and this is the routine and you've got to learn it. You've got to do it this way. And if you don't do it this way you'll be really really wrong."

**JC:** Almost being chased out of the room with a broom kind of thing!

**Tom:** (Laughs) Yes, yes! So it's just been nice to be able to have your own freedom and to be able to just have a solo and to be able to do something with it. And if you want to change it you can change it. And if you want to add something to it you can add something to it as well.

Tom notes that it has been liberating when choreographing his solo 'to be kind of able to take it where I sort of want to take it', before contrasting it with previous experiences of choreography where the freedom to extemporise was not given ('Er, 'cos never in dance are you ever able to be given that freedom usually.').

Overall, the skills acquired during the students training seems to have inspired a confidence in individuals that they may be able to pursue successful careers in the creative industry. A general thread of conversation during each of the final interviews with the students was what they thought might come after the completion of their training. Three of the students saw their futures intertwined with the theatre company, specifically in the form of becoming one of the Artists that regularly appearing the company's output alongside developing their own creative projects:

**Bob:** I think where it can take me... it can take me to... I think it can definitely take me to where I want to be as an artist. So like someone who specialises in not only in one subject like dance but also who can... collaborate in like music and theatre as well... So someone who can collaborate in all three together and then work with the team at [name of theatre]. And works with other companies and deliver the same... which is what I'd love to do. And just... erm continue what I love doing, performing.

**JC:** So your short and long term goals are to carry on working here, collaborating, as well as outside [of the theatre company]

**Bob:** Exactly. And looking at new opportunities for me. 'Cos there's so many opportunities out there in the world where I can look into... and get myself out there. And just so you know, being at [name of theatre] has really helped me so much. I couldn't think of a better place. (Bob Interview 3 lines 102 - 115)

**James:** And, erm, when I leave here... well I say leave but I want to become an Artist here...

**JC:** And what's attractive about being an Artist here?

**James:** It's the fact that a lot of places... the reason I chose [name of theatre] is because a lot of places that are like drama schools, or like colleges or universities after the three years they'll like just leave you. They'll leave you hanging. They'll leave you to fend for yourself. Whereas [name of theatre] kind of teaches you to kind of... that there are more than one pathways but there is like a promotion kind of thing. And that they just don't leave you. There isn't just that, like, left hanging kind of thing. (James Interview 3 lines 121-128)

**Bryan:** There was the discussion, erm, [name of staff] said to me have you thought about joining the Artists?

**JC:** Oh Wow!

**Bryan:** Yeah. And I thought... you know I have actually thought about it and it sounds interesting...

**JC:** What sounds interesting?

**Bryan:** Like I know the Artists do shows and, er, they do like their own projects. And... I've never thought about, like, the Artist's projects because I feel like: "Can I do like my own projects?" Like you get that feeling, can I do it? And also like the funding to get it and stuff like that. (Bryan Interview 3 lines 155-164)

This act of linking their future aspirations to continued engagement with the theatre company suggests both that the students feel comfortable and at 'home' within the theatre, but just as importantly recognise that it is a place where it may be possible to achieve their artistic goals. Tom's thoughts on his future capabilities (Interview 3, lines 100-116) demonstrate both a pragmatism with regards to the profession he hopes to enter and a personal determination and belief that he can succeed:

**Tom:** I think it's taking me even more onto a creative path. And erm, you know, performing and acting. And I know people say it's so difficult to be an actor. Never become an actor because it's so hard. And they say never become an actor because you'll never get any work and you might get a bit of work, you might not get a bit of work. Er, but hopefully it is, er, going to mean that I do, I am kind of setting the... I am kind of setting myself up if you like for a creative path. And then of course to be an actor, which is what I want to do.

**JC:** OK and knowing that it's tricky, why do you still want to commit to it?

**Tom:** I think because... the reason why I want to commit to it even though I know... I've been told by loads of people it's hard, it's difficult, you should never become an actor because you never, may never get any work. And if you do you'll have to work for it...

**JC:** So why aren't you listening to them then!

**Tom:** Why aren't I listening to them? Why am I not going off and doing something else? Just because I suppose that I know kind of within myself that I can do it.

Finally, Tink (Interview 3, lines 97-127) potentially speaks for the aspirations and intentions of the group as a whole. There seems to be developed within the students a sense of the possible; that aspirations can conceivably be achieved and creative working futures be attained. This is not a limited or constrained future, but rather one of an 'endless list of possibilities', crucially decided not by external agencies, but emanating from the individual students themselves. It shows that the theatre's mission of 'raising aspirations (AATE interview Chapter 6) are being realised:

**Tink:** Well... ever since I can remember I've always dreamt big. Erm..

**JC:** Good. Dream big now then!

**Tink:** It's either go big or go home for me. And I don't wanna go home! So yeah, I've always dreamed of performing on a stage. Which came true because I did it in showcase. But I think what I really, actually wanna do... I dunno I'm in two minds, 'cos part of me wants to give back... so teach back to other people. But then there's a part of me that wants to take all that and perform in bigger arenas. Like London or tours or Las Vegas or New York. So I kind of wanna like travel but do my own thing at the same time. So yeah.

**JC:** So let's break that down. The first one you said was about teaching and giving back. What would that look like?

**Tink:** Erm because when I look at what's in [name of hometown/location of theatre] now... being an aunt I really wanna show my nephew that he can do whatever he wants to do. But there's not many places where he would be able to express himself. So... and I think working... well not working, but like looking after my siblings and my cousins there's that side of me that wants to look after children everywhere. So, yeah, I kind of wanna like give them... give back what I've been taught.

**JC:** Fantastic. Like pass it on?

**Tink:** Yeah, like pass it down to the next generation and show them... that there is hope and there is a place that you can be yourself in. You're not all alone.

**JC:** That's a lovely sentiment... and then on the performing side you want to continue to develop?

**Tink:** Yeah, 'cos I feel like now there's so many opportunities I could take. It's just like which one, which one should I take. But then I'm like: "Well take them all!" And then whichever one you like you stick with. 'Cos if you didn't take that opportunity then you wouldn't end up... you know... you might not end up where you wanted to be so... yeah it's kind of like an endless list of opportunities right now.

Her confident assertion of her intent to 'go big or go home' neatly encapsulates the attitudes that I saw on display time and time again in the rehearsal rooms at the theatre company. Tink depicts an independent future ('do my own thing') in which she chooses the work she wishes to do. She also magnanimously shares a desire to 'give back' and 'pass on' to 'the next generation' some of the skills that she has acquired whilst at the theatre that she wishes to share with the 'next generation'. This is born from Tink's understanding that, within the space of this workplace, 'there is hope and there is a place you can be yourself in.'

The content of the training, (which is accredited by a northern university as a level 4 course - equivalent to the first year of a bachelor degree) is technical, challenging and comprehensive. Allied to the supportive manner in which it is presented, it engenders an environment in which the students appear to thrive. Their talk is of achievement. Using assertive and positive language they talked of goals set and attained that led them to imagine creative futures within the creative industries as facilitators, collaborators and performers. These students have been given the latitude to dream big. Not in a naive manner, but pragmatically, building upon their training to identify where their skillset can be applied.

### **Scene 5 - A Spectre's monologue**

The mariachi trumpet plays and fills studio 3 with its manic and melancholic air. In response to its melody a group of seven learning disabled artists move and swarm chaotically around our spectre who stands still and looks directly out to the small audience (tutor, two support staff and myself) before him. At a mark in the music the group freeze into a tableau, and the spectre speaks over the mournful trumpet as I attempt to watch the action and furiously scribble down snippets of a monologue that begins:

"I couldn't cope in a mainstream school... I got bullied... There was one kid that wouldn't leave me alone... Eventually I snapped... You know when they say you 'see red'? Well that shit's real. It's like I was looking through the world through blood... I ended up setting fire to his locker and they kicked me out."

To be fair he had me at 'couldn't cope', and I'm already fully invested in this brave piece of autoethnography that is being rehearsed before me, but at the cue of 'out', the group of harpies recommence their pestering of the spectre, swirling around him while two of their number reach under his arms, lift him several inches off the floor and transport him to another part of the space.

Setting him down, they rejoin the rest of the ensemble, attempting to disrupt and disturb his equilibrium until once again a hidden cue causes them to freeze into a tableau. Over the baleful trumpet the spectre continues:

"I ended up getting sent to a PRU [pupil referral unit], but at the first one you only had to be there in the morning and I ended up getting into fights outside, so I got kicked out of there as well."

Once again, the ensemble begin their uncoordinated, churning routines, embodying for me in their movement the dance of the spectre through the educational system. Closing in and lifting him again they relocate him to another part of the room, setting him down and freezing once more so that he can relate:

"The second one smelt of soil and the walls were green and red. I got kicked out of there as well."

This stark and terse dismissal, with its powerful use of synecdoche to characterise the unsuitability of this so-called 'provision' catches me off guard. It

also hits home harder with the juxtaposition of these words being shared in the warm, well-equipped, professional space of the theatre.

Foucault argues convincingly in his final writings that power can be troubled and worried by the act of Parrhēsia - *the courageous act of speaking truth to power*. The spectre's monologue is doing just this, calling back to the injustice and disregard that he experienced when attempting to navigate the educational system as a learning disabled scholar. I am deeply moved and angered greatly by what this young man is sharing about his educational experience because it resonates so deeply with the multitude of stories that I have heard during my time supporting both learning disabled adults and students. But the denouement which follows reveals that it was never the spectre's intention to leave us in this state. This, it turns out, is a tale not of tragedy, but resistance and survival.

As the action recommences, the group's movements lose their frenetic, uncoordinated nature. No longer disjointed, they become harmonious and connected. Working as a group they again surround the spectre, but whereas before they transmitted a sense of antagonism this is now replaced with a sense of care. With the spectre in the middle, they form a close horseshoe around him. They literally seem to have his back (along with his front and sides). Once again he looks directly at his audience and delivers the final lines:

"I ended up going to a special school. You could choose what you did there on a Friday and I enjoyed going outside. The staff there trusted you."

To illustrate this trust and the effect it had on him, the spectre leans forward into the arms of two members of the group. Catching him by the shoulders they lift him upwards at the same moment as the other members of the



group hold him securely at his chest, hips, legs and feet. Straightening their arms he is suddenly, dramatically, held above their heads. He looks at his audience and unfolds his arms from his side. Wings outstretched he is ready to go and move on. A smile of real joy breaks across his face as the group, working together as a team, begin to fly him across the room.

### **Comments on the Spectre's Monologue**

The above interlude was created in response to a ghost that has increasingly come to haunt my work. An absence that is important because it shows clearly how easy it still is for a talented young adult with learning disabilities to be denied access to meaningful training through no fault of their own. A story of a spectre that failed to escape the 'bureaucratic order' and felt the full weight of modern British governmentality. Set against the reported success of students and artists allowed to participate on the well-considered and professionally delivered courses offered by the theatre company, I believe that this absence must be addressed.

The cultural theorist Mark Fisher developed his concept of hauntology (2014) in response to the stark state of Capitalist Realism (2009) his earlier work had depicted. At the heart of the depiction is a state of affairs whereby, in the modern society, it becomes, 'easier to imagine the end of the world than capitalism.' (2009, p1) This mode has been responsible, Fisher adds, for 'the slow cancellation of the future'. (2014, p2). Hauntology is the tool of resistance he develops to trouble Capitalist Realism. As an aside, the term hauntology is interesting in that it derives from a terrible pun. First conceived by Derrida in his work, *Spectres of Marx* (1993), Hauntology is born through pronouncing ontology - the study of the nature of being - with a thick French accent, thus giving birth to 'hauntologie', a study of haunted being. A being stalked by the absent and silenced. Fisher argues, like Derrida, and following Shakespeare that 'time is out of joint.' (*Hamlet* Act 1, Scene V line 211). He suggests the present is pregnant with

the spectres of lost futures which were never allowed to come to pass. Such as a truly meritocratic and equitable provision of post school opportunities for able/disabled young adults. He writes, 'what should haunt us is not the no longer of actually existing social democracy, but the not yet of futures that popular modernism trained us to expect but never materialised.' (Fisher 2014, p27) Modernism, he argues, is all about jam tomorrow, and most of us now understand that the pot is empty and maybe was empty all along. However, rather than becoming an exercise in melancholia, a sad resignation to an acceptance of denied possibilities, he argues that the hauntologist can use awareness of these 'not yet' futures' as a rallying point, an instigator of resistance that 'consists not in giving up on desire, but refusing to yield.' (Fisher 2014, p24)

Fisher's work came back and haunted me because of my understanding of the spectre's experience at the theatre company. From the start he was one of the most affable and gregarious of a naturally affable and gregarious group (the joys of working with arts students!) I talked with him extensively, both in session and in the breaks between sessions, and watched as he worked hard to create music and dramatic pieces of his own. In particular he had a piece that detailed his treatment by the education system (the monologue remembered above) that paired powerful remembrances with moments of physical theatre. I experienced it as a moving piece of autoethnography - the rewriting of the self in the face of dominant discourses. A piece of autoethnography that functioned as an act of *parrhēsia*, the term employed by Foucault to denote the courageous act of speaking truth to power. In this instance a powerful first person testimony documenting the difficulties still faced by a learning disabled scholar when engaging with educational governmentality.

I watched the spectre lifted and flown head high around the room in the capable hands of his peers as he delivered lines that spoke of a journey of neglect, survival and redemption. I was literally counting down the days until I talked to

him about it in the three unstructured interviews we had scheduled for after Christmas. But after Christmas never came. I returned in January to be told that he had been forced to quit the course due to financial issues and inadequate support.

I was informed that this was not uncommon: a conversation with the HLS informed me that because the students on the course receive other benefits, they cannot apply for student loans without these benefits being affected. They are then reduced to applying for funding through their local council. This can only be done, in the first instance, by placing a call with a duty social worker and requesting a care assessment. A social worker will then decide if the potential student meets the eligibility criteria. If so, they will be allocated a PIP payment (as Bryan was above) and they have to decide how much of this payment to allocate to paying the fee at the theatre (£50 per day - £200p/w for academy students), or the local council will pay some or all of the fee to the theatre. Interestingly the theatre has been told that their funding has to come out of (already decimated) social care budgets rather than educational budgets as the theatre is not classed by local and central government as an educational establishment (despite its three year course being accredited by a local university). Again, we see clear evidence of the prejudice of the bureaucratic order and its acts of governmentality. Prospective non-disabled students do not have to endure an interview with a social worker to determine if they can access educational and training opportunities, so why should disabled students have to?

Two excerpts from conversations illustrate this injustice. Firstly, the testimony of the Head of Learning and Support (HLS) when talking with Tink (Tink interview 2, lines 103-111), revealed that securing funding for their attendance was far from easy:

**HLS:** And it wasn't straightforward was it!

**Tink:** No 'cos funding was an issue. We had several meetings.

**JC:** Was this a benefits issue?

**HLS:** No. WS you didn't have a social worker to help get you funding for it did you...?

**Tink:** No.

**HLS:** So, we had to start the process didn't we? And, er, yeah, it took a long time but we got there in the end! We had to get the local MP involved didn't we?

The fact that the aid of a 'local MP' had to be sought just to get funding reveals the true disparity in our educational/training systems. Non disabled school leavers do not have to face these barriers when attempting to access further education so, again, why should a learning disabled student have to? Secondly the testimony of Bryan who, as the reader may remember also shared his ongoing interaction with the DWP (Interview 3 lines 202-207):

"'cos I certainly don't wanna do Home Bargains for the rest of my life. Because I only do it because, erm, to pay my fees for here. And also pay my rent and my travel and I don't get... and I'm on PIP, which is Personal Independence Payment but I don't get a lot 'cos unfortunately the, erm, what I... they score you on certain levels..."

But in spite of this Bryan had been able to escape the bureaucratic order and remained on site, benefitting from the structures, support and training provided by the theatre company. But the spectre did not. Although he did not consent to withdraw from a training program he clearly loved and was progressing well in, it was still enacted upon him in an act of cold governmentality.

In Fisher's terms, his absence haunts my work as a 'not yet' that has 'failed to materialise': the 'not yet' being understood as the ability of all learning disabled

school leavers to unproblematically access training and development that is both stimulating and meaningful to them.

His case is important because it speaks powerfully in its silence of the continued impact acts of governmentality have on people with learning disabilities. It shows why answers to Titchkosky's question are so important to find. His ghost shows how easy it still can be for a young adult with learning disabilities to be denied access to meaningful post school training and development, and why it is incumbent on allies of learning disabled people like myself to continue to agitate for this parity.

### **Final thoughts**

In this and the preceding chapter I have sought to share to the best of my abilities some of my experiences during my time at the theatre. By sharing a curated overview of conversations with staff and students interspersed with extended descriptions of actions and events I witnessed I have tried to provide the reader with a sense of the project that is underway within the confines of the theatre. I have tried to build a case that the equitable principles upon which the company operates combine with a commitment to Co-operation and Co-Facilitation that results in a training environment in which the learning disabled artists and students feel free to experiment and develop autonomously. I shall continue to develop this argument in the following chapter.

## **Chapter 8 - Discussion**

"I'm working on a building of love.

Gonna build it in the name of everyone."

Chairmen of the Board: *Working on a Building of Love*

### **Chapter overview**

This chapter serves to summarise the thesis and allows me to restate how the ideas and theories of the earlier chapters were explored onsite. It will be of interest to readers who wish to know my overall thoughts on the theatre and the people who work within its walls. In essence, it will serve as a space in which to pause and reflect before moving onto the final chapter.

I shall revisit what I believe is being brought into being at the theatre company and how, post school, the training is seemingly providing an experience for the students replete with exciting opportunities and possibilities. An equitable and inclusive place and atmosphere has deliberately been created at the theatre 'in the name of everyone.' By revisiting the testimonies of staff and students I hope to lay out clearly how the everyday practices of the theatre are creating a particular environment and atmosphere (of which the training program is a part) which not only challenges traditional conceptions of the capabilities of learning disabled students, but also provides a space in which the hopes and convictions of the students enrolled on the course are renewed in the sense that their training is encouraging them to imagine what their futures might look like.

### **Introduction**

This chapter will bring together the work of the previous two chapters. I shall refer back to the narratives shared during the course of the interviews and attempt to bring them together under a series of themes. Reiterating my agreement with Atkinson's ideas (2015) I am clear that these themes did not

emerge from the text whilst I passively received them. Rather this was an active process of me imposing themes onto the texts (interview, transcriptions, fieldnotes) through the abductive process of moving back and forth between my direct and remembered experience onsite and the 'sensitising concepts' (Blumer 2015, p57) I brought to the work, using the six step method advocated by Braun and Clarke (2013, 2014, 2019, 2020).

I will highlight areas of significance that speak directly to the research aims of the thesis. Specifically, I shall identify themes that I constructed in the course of my analysis. I shall begin by directly addressing my first research aim:

**RA1: To document and describe the processes and practices of a particular training provision for young adults with learning disabilities.**

I will argue that the theatre is a well resourced, professional, equitable, collaborative, creative and activist space. This is achieved because of an institutional conviction of the potential of learning disabled people to be and become independent thinkers, decision makers and professional artists. The theatre curates a particular atmosphere within the building so that individuals feel supported and able to experiment. This liberatory act of placing trust in individuals to develop, devise, produce and perform their own work delivers results that are akin to the 'everyday arias' Atkinson (2005) observed at the Welsh National Opera. Learning disabled people working diligently to produce art that 'fictions' ableist conceptions of what a learning disability can mean and do in modern society.

I will then directly address my second research aim:

**RA2: To document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term training program.**

Following the precedent stated above I shall again introduce themes that have been self generated through my continued engagement with fieldnotes and the transcripts of the conversations held with students. I shall argue that their experiences are (with the exception of the spectre) universally positive. The students clearly feel supported, comfortable and trusted at the theatre company. This is because their shared desire to train as professional artists has been accommodated, nurtured and developed by the course they are enrolled upon. They express clearly that the course is matching, and often outstripping their expectations, and helping them to conceive of creative futures within the arts sector. Engagement with the course is making them independent thinkers and decision makers regarding their individual futures. They are succeeding because they have been fortunate to have been able to access training and development that matches their interests and aspirations. Building on this I will begin to argue of the urgent necessity to provide similar opportunities for all learning disabled people so that they too are afforded the opportunity to achieve their potential and to 'be who they are'.

**RA1: To document and describe the processes and practices of a particular training provision for young adults with learning disabilities.**

**"All this beautiful space and all these beautiful studios" - The space and atmosphere of the theatre.**

From my first observation session, and indeed throughout the course of this research, it became clear that the space the theatre inhabits is a vital factor in its ongoing success. The practice of providing a thoughtful, well resourced, professional, beautifully maintained space for the artists and students to congregate and work in is a definite factor in the ongoing success of the theatre company. Scholars such as Imrie (2001, 1998) and Callus (2017) pay particular attention to what Imrie describes as 'geographies of disability' (2001, p231). They



show the importance of deconstructing the built environments (and immaterial spaces) that disabled people are expected to inhabit. As Callus (2017, p3 notes) 'disabled people tend to be restricted in the physical spaces they inhabit'. I would add that ableist society, responding to learning disability with charity, pity or revulsion, often curates spaces with sanctimonious, paternalistic and austere atmospheres in which learning disabled people are expected to operate. This is not the case at the theatre: here is a purpose built environment expressly designed for learning disabled people to be unrestricted in their personal and professional development. As such it stands as a counterpoint to the 'barriered and bounded places' (Imrie 2001) usually experienced by learning disabled people.

At the heart of this are two things. In the first instance, the permanence of the space allows artists, staff and students to conceive of the space as a base in which to begin their artistic exploration. The second important thing to note about the space is the high specification to which it has been finished. This transmits to all who work within the building that the theatre is invested in the production of art made by learning disabled people, and that the art they make deserves to be shared on a professional stage. It transmits a trust and belief in the capabilities of those working within it, but also an understanding of the particular needs of this group of people. Debord (1955 p1), when beginning his exposition of Psychogeography, discusses the need to attend to 'the specific effects of the geographical environment... on the emotions and behaviours of individuals.' This happens within the space of the theatre which is curated in an accessible manner to ensure all who enter it are freed to create. The Associate Artist in Music (AAM) refers to this directly when he notes (AAM interview lines 174-179):

"Well it's a very, very clever building, erm, for that because you have got to walk down about eight steps - not too far - and within that eight steps you're suddenly - well if you're a bit more reticent you can turn off and go to the left towards the lockers - or if you're

a little bit more whatever, social, you can go in and embrace it and get hugs or, erm, you know."

It is a building that wants to accommodate difference from the moment that an individual steps over the threshold. This again takes us back to Debord who exhorts readers to attend to the 'sudden change of ambience in a street within a few meters; the evident division of a city into zones of distinct psychic atmospheres.' (1955 p3-4). I would suggest at the theatre that this division is reduced from meters to the thickness of the impressive glass doors that separates the theatre from the outside world. Moving from the cracked pavements and uneven streets outside to the warmth and light of a polished, precise and designed interior is an exhilarating experience. It renews faith that things do not have to be the way they currently are. Feeling 'social'? Come right on in and join the fun. Feeling overwhelmed or 'reticent'? Well there's a calm, quiet space waiting for you too. It is an environment not merely of training and development. On the contrary it is a space in which learning disabled people can unapologetically 'be who they are.' In my personal experience of supporting first adults and then students with learning disabilities, this is unusual. Often the spaces provided for learning disabled people are temporary or shared and perfunctory at best. Ableist expectations of decorum (of the type so deliciously skewered by Berwick in the series of skits referred to in Chapter 2) and rules of how to behave in them invariably dominate public spaces. This cannot be said of the theatre.

It is no surprise then that, given 'all this beautiful space, all these beautiful studios' that the theatre is both a source of pride to the staff and students, as well as being a secure space in which people feel able to experiment. Two quotes, the first from the Associate Artist in Theatre and Engagement (AATE lines 109-114) and the second one from Bob (Interview 2 lines 70-72) illustrate this well:

**SB:** Well it's just, just the investment isn't it? You're invested in a building to build a place that makes change. It's not a community hall, it's not at the back of someone else's building. It's not a building that you have to leave at the end of the day. It's a building that's purposely built... and it's designed to, for, this purpose.

**JC:** And what were your first impressions? When you walked down the stairs and into the place?

**Bob:** My next home.

The built and psychogeographical environment in which the daily activities of the theatre occur are a vital part of its ongoing success. In contrast to the temporary and ill equipped spaces people with learning disabilities can find themselves deposited ('The second one smelt of soil and the walls were green' - Spectre's monologue previous chapter) there is a permanence and professionalism to the theatre space that helps to remind those who work within its walls that what is being created and crafted is a serious concern. This is not just a space in which to play at being a student or an artist, rather a space in which the possibility of becoming either is tangible. Its existence urges us to recognise that similarly well equipped training provision can and must be provided for other students with learning disabilities.

### **"That's where the fun happens." The atmosphere of The Agora.**

Potentially the most important space within the theatre is the communal space, referred to in the course of this research as 'The Agora'. The practice of providing a place within the building with the express purpose of 'just to let them be who they are' is both refreshing and provocative. It makes one think unfavourably of all the other spaces in which learning disabled people are forced: (e.g. medical wards, DWP meeting rooms, segregated learning units, group homes etc). Discipline, surveillance and correction underpin these spaces, but here in

The Agora individuals are free to evade the panoptic 'gaze' so many of their peers are subjected to. As the Associate Artist in music says (AAM interview line 222)

"So if people wanna banter or ignore me they can do that."

This explicit articulation of the possibility of a learning disabled person ignoring a non disabled person, particularly a non disabled person in a position of authority, marks the atmosphere and ethos of the theatre as unusual. As many commentators note (e.g. Stiker 1999, Foucault 1993), in many public situations the act of ignoring by a learning disabled person is usually viewed as an act of rebellion or non-compliance. An act that incurs either sanction, censure or correction. The power dynamic that infuses our ableist culture demands that learning disabled people are never able to ignore the instructions and strictures of the ableist majority, whilst at the same time non-disabled people are freed to routinely and arbitrarily ignore disabled people as they see fit. This dynamic is broken and reimagined in The Agora. The learning disabled artists and students get to choose who, when, why and what they engage with. This freedom marks it as their space. In Chapter 5 I detailed how the space is thought of as being both an area in which artists and students can relax, come together, socialise and be themselves (which is in itself notable, given the dearth of similar spaces), and whose conducive atmosphere can also be the fermenting ground for some of the projects that the theatre company develops. Summing up the atmosphere in the Agora, the AMM says (lines 188-191):

**AAM:** And then within that you're then in [the agora] and that's where the fun happens. Where all the social things happen. That's where the noise happens, that's where the banter happens.

Additionally, the creative potential of this space was addressed directly by the Artistic Director (AD), at the theatre when talking of the multi modal piece

that was developed directly from a conversation between staff and artists that occurred in the agora (AD interview lines 115–118):

**AD:** And this one seed of an idea come from, er, one of our artists whose sister also has a learning disability, having a child, a baby, a premature baby, and then because... Have you heard of this story?

Taken together they illustrate neatly how the act of providing a permanent, professional, secure base for learning disabled artists and students can lead to (quite literally) dramatic results. And again, once instigated these creative ideas are able to be worked through because the professional space of the theatre provides a perfect environment in which to realise them. As *Scene 1 - Warming Up* (Chapter 5), or *Scene 5 - A Spectre's Monologue* (Chapter 7) detail, the combination of the competence of the staff, the space of the theatre and the dedication of the artists and students to perfect their work is leading to exciting work that is both informing and driving conversations around the capability and possibility of learning disability within modern society.

### **"Everything becomes a conversation." Cooperation at the theatre.**

An important daily practice at the theatre, that facilitates the process of creating an equitable workplace, is the willingness of all to collaborate and cooperate. Cooperation is significant because usually relationships between learning disabled people and non disabled people are built on the latter dictating and directing the terms of engagement to the former. The cooperation witnessed at the theatre, and described in the conversations with staff and students speaks of a desire by all to create an equitable workplace where disability and ability can work alongside each other mutually and unproblematically. The insistence on cooperation also suggests a loosening of the hierarchies that usually inform spaces of training and development for learning disabled people. The Head of Creative Engagement (HCE interview lines 436–438) notes:

"There's some kind of culture here of, erm..., I think it's about opportunity and creating those opportunities for those things to happen.

Whilst the Executive Director adds (ED interview lines 9-12)

"Erm, you know I wanna create lots of space for... you know good ideas can come from anywhere. So it's how to create the conditions where people feel able and willing and motivated to kind of step into that space."

This sense of 'good ideas' coming 'from anywhere' allows, for instance, the input of a learning disabled artist to instigate a multimedia project undertaken by the entire theatre company. Cooperation is evident in many of the activities I witnessed at the theatre, and reaches its apogee in the descriptions of the role of the Co-Facilitator (*Scene 2 The Drumming Lesson* Chapter 6). This is a space of consultation (e.g. discussions around pass/fail vs achieving, improving excelling) (Chapter 6), or the discussions with artists that were the genesis for the multimodal production (Chapter 5). The staff talk about cooperating both with each other (AAM Lines 421-428):

I'm almost forced to experiment all the time. "What are you gonna do now?" And, and you're inspired by what other people are doing. Last year was a classic example. [name removed] bought that ladder in with all the leads on it for one of her plays. And it's just like that's awe and wonder right there. Brilliant. Thanks for that. And even if that doesn't directly inspire me to do what I'm doing, it certainly filled me with awe and wonder and it's just like saying there are new possibilities for me there. You can't act on all the inspiration that you get, but the fact is it's just *there*.

and the students (AATE lines 200-204):

Because of the development of the Artists and because of the changes within our, the way we work creatively, I suppose, is like having the Artists in a more collaborative role. And helping us make stuff... with their..., with them in the decision making from as early on as possible.

This sense of working together is picked up by the Creative Engagement Producer (CEP lines 594-601):

I would like the inclusive approach to be rolled out wider. So when we're looking at things like work placements, work experiences, people working in other companies, erm, people coming here and learning that the idea of working alongside one another is expanded on and people begin to understand that. That that's possible. That is not impossible. And that, that idea, that, erm, that hierarchy of you know: "Oh I'm supporting that person to be in this meeting." That's not there anymore. We're both contributing, we're collaborating together.

The possibility of cooperating is not a happenstance occurrence. It is a process that has actively been embarked upon by the company. It comes from a deep institutional conviction in the possibility inherent within the learning disabled artists and students and the subsequent engagement by the senior management team with how they may create the conditions in which this space may exist. This thought is exemplified, I believe by the following excerpt from the Executive Director (ED lines 7-11):

Erm, and so I... I suppose I - the way I try to conduct myself in my role here at [name of theatre] - is to, erm, kind of a bit of herding!

And a bit of corralling! Erm, you know I wanna create lots of space for... you know good ideas can come from anywhere.

**"That's so powerful, and I don't think you know how powerful that is." The possibility of learning disability**

Another practice evident in the daily activities of the theatre is the institutional conviction in the possibility inherent within the artists and students who create and train within its walls. What is significant about this is that learning disability is invariably referred to and understood by the ableist majority as a deficit or defect. Such a conception makes the idea of locating possibility and potentiality in someone labelled as possessing learning disabilities unlikely. Again, the theatre company works hard to undermine such conceptions. In the rehearsal rooms and studios the talk is all of what can be achieved. This belief is not idealistic but entirely pragmatic and grounded in experience. The theatre has been producing and performing work to national and international acclaim for over three decades. Work which is entirely reliant on the skills and talents of a succession of learning disabled artists.

As much as it is a theatre *for* learning disabled people it is also a theatre *by* learning disabled people. Without their willingness to contribute it would cease to exist. That they do, and the full rehearsal rooms and studios attest to this, is due in no small part to the way the staff perceive the artists and students who work within the building. Across the interviews what came through was the deep institutional conviction in the possibility of learning disabled people to create and perform work that speaks to and for learning disabled people. The very act of maintaining a professional theatre for learning disabled art for over three decades speaks powerfully of this. As does developing an in-house training scheme for the next generation of learning disabled artists. Taken together they illustrate a company-wide belief in the ability of artists and students to devise, develop,



produce and perform work that can be shared with a local, national and international audience.

Having worked alongside fêted artists such as Jackson, the theatre knows that learning disabled artists are more than capable of producing financially viable, intellectually engaging, dramatically moving pieces of art. Indeed, the staff made continual reference to the talents of the students. This is best illustrated by the sentiment shared by the Associate Artist in Theatre (AAT interview lines 278-280)

You also get like just magic moments where I'm watching pieces and I'm like: "My goodness me! That's so powerful, and I don't think you know how powerful that is."

or the Associate Artist in Music's response ('That's just brilliant' AAM interview line 115) to the suggestion made about a musical based on bags. Additionally, three separate members of staff invoked, in positive terms, the talents possessed by Jackson ('he's ridiculously talented', 'he can do anything naturally', 'a wonderful musician'). This is, I suggest an unusual way of talking about learning disability, which is usually described with reference to inability.

But beyond this, the theatre also holds a deep seated belief in the possibility of the artists and students to develop additional skills through training that are outside the creative sphere. As the Associate Artist in Theatre and Engagement noted (AATE interview lines 18-19)

'we're demanding more of them and raising aspirations within the group.'

The theatre pragmatically knows that not all the artists and students will be fortunate to carve out careers as successful artists, and so tries to address this.

This marks it as an 'alternative workspace' as described by Hall and Wilton (2015). The theatre is in the business of producing theatre. A traditional model, based on competitive self interest, would lead it to discard those individuals who could not bring value to the business. But not here. There is a refusal to leave anyone behind. If an individual doesn't have the chops to be an actor, they don't get the chop. Instead, time and effort is spent by the theatre on discerning where their talents may take them next. That this is explicitly understood by those who train and develop there is articulated by James (Interview 3 lines 124-129):

"the reason I chose [name of theatre] is because a lot of places that are like drama schools, or like colleges or universities after the three years they'll like just leave you. They'll leave you hanging. They'll leave you to fend for yourself. Whereas [name of theatre] kind of teaches you to kind of... that there are more than one pathways."

In the discussion around the role of the Co-Facilitator (Chapter 6) the discussion around the Assistant Marketing Role created to give responsibility for the company's social media account to one of the artists (Chapter 6), or the reference to the 'three intern opportunities' made by the Head of Creative Engagement (Chapter 6), we see a determination to reimagine what learning disability can mean and do within the workplace. Not placed at the periphery, but brought into the heart of a business. Involved and consulted in all the decisions that are taken in moving the business forward.

### **"Well my problem is that it's bollocks!" Activism at the theatre**

The daily practice of the theatre automatically positions it as an activist space that seeks to promote the cause of learning disabled people. Given that at the time of writing (early January 2024), the UK government only installed a secretary for disability after the public outcry that followed their initial negligence to do so, such spaces become ever more significant. The daily practices of creating

work (such as the multimedia work surrounding the rights of learning disabled women to become mothers, or the piece discussed in *Scene 1- Warming up* Chapter 5 that serves as an invitation for learning disabled people to contribute towards and comment upon the ongoing climate emergency) that speak for and to the experience of being classed as learning disabled in an ableist society speaks powerfully of a determination to reposition learning disabled people from the periphery of society into valued and incisive cultural commentators. It also adopts Lofthouse's exhortation (2017) that 'life experience is more of an expert than a qualification' and turns it into the starting point for deeply provocative, confrontational work. It is work that in the words of Charlton (2000 p105) demands, 'nothing about us without us'. This practice, seen so often at the theatre, is of deep significance and must be lauded.

Conversations with the staff at the theatre show that they are more than aware of the challenges faced by people with learning disabilities in a post-financial crash, post-austerity, post-Brexit, post Trussonomics Britain. They also see an important part of their practice as sharing these issues with the artists and students in order to make them aware of them. As the Artistic Director (AD interview lines 228-230):

"I feel like we manage to identify, with a group of learning disabled actors, a lot of different barriers that they face in their daily life."

This is significant because there is none of the neutrality that is legislated into formal education (Department of Education, Feb 2022 online). No pretence that what is happening to learning disabled people is the result of anything other than the results of the dual ideologies of ableism and late market capitalism. Significant because the theatre seeks to investigate complex ideas with their students and artists. In this the theatre seems to be aligning with the ideas of the self advocacy movement as articulated by Charlton (2000, p105)

“Self-help groups and webs of affiliation, the passing of notes and development of a history, the creation of alternative images and language, the contestation of reactionary systems [that] all contribute to the evolution of a necessarily resistant counterculture.”

Given the unnecessary uncertainty that recent policy decisions (such as the ongoing refusal by the Sunak administration to divulge what will follow the WCA) have ushered into already precarious lives, learning disabled people can only benefit by having such eloquent, committed allies ready to share and discuss issues that directly affect lives.

The theatre's practice of reflecting on this current state of affairs helps to constitute the theatre as an activist space. Time and again during my time on site the staff made reference to the inequity and injustice faced by learning disabled people and their determination and duty to address it. For instance, the Partner Program Lead and Access Champion (PPLAC interview lines 327-335 notes):

Well I think [name of company] - as Europe's leading theatre company for working with and for people with learning disabilities - I think they have a voice, erm, that they need to, erm, share. Because they've got a unique perspective on that experience. And the challenges and the difficulties around that experience as well that should be shared... I think, erm, there's a sort of... almost a moral obligation to kind of really challenge the world and challenge the narrative that people with learning disabilities *can't do*. Because that is still the current thinking.

There is an activist element to the theatre, 'almost a moral obligation', that agitates and speaks back to ableist conceptions of learning disability. As Charlton (2000 p241) so eloquently notes:

“Within the impossibility of the real end to disability oppression lies the possibility, even the probability, of significant political and social progress.”

This is apparent throughout the interviews with staff and the comments made by several individuals. The daily practice of the theatre centres around working to ensure both equity of opportunity and a recognition of the importance of learning disability as a vibrant identity. When the Executive Director, for instance, talks about how charities and the 'benefits system' routinely position people with learning disabilities as 'unproductive', she states that such an attitude is 'bollocks', the irritation in her voice on tape palpable. Additionally, the Artistic Director (AD interview lines 47 -49) expresses, during a conversation around the visibility of learning disabled view, opinions that would be readily understood by the critical disability movement:

"And then I find it troubling if you say you don't see disability. Then what do you see? Like do you want, are people trying to, er, pretend that this person is not what they are. What are you trying to see then as if not themselves."

Commentators such as Campbell (2009) argue persuasively that ableist societies are unhealthily obsessed with the covering up or erasure of disability in a misguided attempt to enforce compulsory normativity. This does not happen at the theatre, where the practice of recognising the value and vibrancy of learning disability is deeply entrenched.

But as with all things at the theatre there is not the desire to speak on behalf of the students and artists but rather, following Freirean principles of *conscientizacao* (Freire 2017), to share with and talk through with the students their current predicament, and facilitate their desire to articulate their understanding and frustrations to wider audiences.

The daily practice of theatre seems to be trying to create the conditions for artists and students to critique the role they have been allotted in ableist society. They work hard to inculcate the belief and confidence that they have in the students and artists into the students and artists themselves. This is a place where supporting, training and developing artists and students to realise and recognise their potential is an essential part of the underlying ethos of the company. The results of this will be discussed in the following section which addresses directly my second research aim by revisiting the experiences of the students enrolled on the long term training program at the theatre.

**RA2: To document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term training program.**

Having documented the processes and practices at the theatre the second part of my work was to document how the trainee artists were experiencing this particular training place. What came to light was as follows. Firstly, the students felt comfortable in the environment and atmosphere curated by the theatre. Secondly, the training they were engaged with matched their expectations and was helping them to envision exciting creative futures. Thirdly, the trust shown in their talents by the theatre was encouraging them to back themselves and become independent thinkers and decision makers. Finally, the experience of being at the theatre had imbued the students to become activist thinkers, ready to call out, contest and critique injustice and prejudice as and where they

experience it. All of these are highly significant in their own way and I shall now address each in turn.

### **"My next home!" Belonging at the theatre**

During my conversations with them it became clear that their environment was providing both a supportive yet challenging environment in which students were being encouraged to push themselves and develop their artistic skills. Their daily experience at the theatre was reported in universally positive terms. For instance, Bob and Tink both invoked the word 'home' to describe their feelings towards the theatre, (Chapter 7) whilst Bryan and James contrasted their prior, negative, experience of formal education with the training environment in which they now found themselves (Chapter 7).

This is significant because as Callus (2017) reminds us disabled people often lead isolated lives. Additionally, the work of Ryan (2019) and Clifford (2020) highlights how dangerous and literally life threatening underfunded, ill equipped and egregiously staffed physical environments can be for disabled people (e.g. Winterbourne, Whorlton Hall). But this is not the case at the theatre. When theorising psychogeography, Debord (1955 p1) noted that it was 'the study of precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviours of individuals. We see this in practice with the reactions of the students to their experience of the space and business of the theatre. Bryan (Interview 3 lines 2-4) notes:

"I'm enjoying it and... to be honest, since I've been coming to [name of theatre] I feel happy here."

This contrasts directly with his earlier reported negative experiences at school (Interview 2 lines 7-9):

"I walked out of school when I was fourteen 'cos I was bullied because of my mental health issues."

Likewise, James transmits his positive experience at the theatre by bringing positive words ('enjoy' and 'cool') to describe his experience (Interview 2 lines 45-47):

"I came here one day a week to see like, to see and be around and enjoy. 'Cos Mondays was theatre and it was really cool."

Whilst Bob talks about the space with reference to interpersonal relationships (interview 3 lines 94-95):

"I've just grown and made so many new friends and family."

It is clear that the atmosphere and ethos curated by the theatre is being felt in a positive way by the students leading them to conceive of their peers and tutors not merely as work colleagues to be tolerated, but important figures in their lives. Adding to this sense of belonging is the satisfaction students reported with regards to the training they were undertaking. It is to this that we shall now turn.

**"Yeah, it's kind of like an endless list of opportunities right now."**

### **Development during training**

All students reported a long term interest in the arts, and performing in particular. This is important in the context of my research, because it cannot be coincidental that all students are fully engaged when accessing a course that matches their interests. In the conversations with the students, it became clear that they all had a longstanding interest in the arts. Their desire to become artists is no passing whim, but a long held goal. This is important because it suggests that other learning disabled school leavers are likely to have long term goals that are



currently not being met in the post school environments they find themselves placed.

The students views on their training experience were shared in universally positive terms. Bob (interview 3 lines 63-64), reflecting on the skills he has attained, notes:

"Well they've definitely excelled at a level I never, I never thought I would expect in my wildest dreams"

His use of 'excelled' is notable in that he seems to have internalised the equitable assessment criteria (achieving, improving, excelling as opposed to pass/fail) developed by the theatre in consultation with the students (Chapter 6). Tom transmits the sense of the new things he has learnt whilst participating on the training (interview 3 lines 54-64):

"I think my skills have developed a lot from when I joined the company... you're learning stuff that I wouldn't have known had I not been on this course."

Whilst Tink suggests that her desire to learn has increased through participating in this particular training environment (interview 3 lines 66-67):

"I'm more intrigued to learn more things now than I was before."

This is significant because Tomlinson invokes the metaphor of the 'SEN cliff edge' to describe the neglect of learning disabled people's futures that she identifies as being prevalent in modern society. Once out of formal education she worries about the lack of future provision for young adults with learning disabilities. The experiences of the students on this particular course suggest that these fears could be assuaged if only all learning disabled students transitioning

from formal to tertiary education could access spaces such as those constructed at the theatre. James' comments show us what is at stake (interview 3 lines 70-71):

"I think I've developed massively. I wouldn't, I wouldn't be able to stay in the room very long when I first came here.... But actually I've learnt life skills here."

Here we see a sense of the training being something more than just technical instruction. There is a development not only as a professional but as a person. This surely marks the theatre as a remarkable place in which to thrive and grow. But what are the outcomes of this development? It is to this that we will now turn.

### **"Right! I'm gonna go and be my free, be myself, be my true authentic self." Independent Thinkers, Decision Makers**

The training experience seems to be having a profound effect on the students' understanding around the agency they have over their own lives, aspirations and career paths. As discussed above, the staff at the theatre show trust in the students to produce creative work and there is a sense that, when first experienced, was novel, exciting and slightly overwhelming:

"That responsibility? It was a bit overwhelming at first."  
(Tink interview 3 lines 18-19)

This act of being given latitude to create, though, is experienced by the students as a liberating experience and something they come to embrace:

'And it's nice, as I was saying, to be given that freedom. Er, 'cos never in dance are you ever able to be given that freedom usually."  
(Tom interview 3 lines 74-74)

Becoming independent thinkers seems to be affecting how they are perceived, not only by themselves, but outside of the building (Tink interview 3 lines 59-61):

but like friends of mine, they're like: "Oh my God! Like you going to uni's proper changed, you've proper changed." I'm like: "In a good way?!"

The confidence they are getting from their experience at the theatre seems to be allowing them to become decision makers, active participants in their own lives. This is highly significant because ableist understandings of learning disability position individuals as passive receivers to be directed and corrected (Campbell 2009, Stiker 1999). In opposition to this the students are direct and assured about what they see transpiring from their experience at the theatre:

"I want to become an artist here."

(James interview 3 lines 121-122)

"I think it's taking me even more onto a creative path. And, erm, you know, performing and acting."

(Tom interview 3 lines 100-101)

"I want to be a professional actor. That's what I want to do. And that's what, that's what I'm just feeling."

(Bryan interview 3 lines 198-200)

"So like someone who specialises in not only in one subject like dance but also who can... collaborate in like music and theatre as well."

(Bob interview 3 lines 103-105)

But I think what I really, actually wanna do... I dunno I'm in two minds, 'cos part of me wants to give back... so teach back to other people. But then there's a part of me that wants to take all that and perform in bigger arenas. Like London or tours or Las Vegas or New York.

(Tink interview 3 lines 102-106)

These are not constrained or truncated futures. In the words of Tink they show a desire to 'either go big or go home... And I don't wanna go home' (interview 3 lines 100-101) Significantly, this confidence is also manifesting itself in a steely resolve to stay the course on the uncertain career path they have chosen. Tom speaks for this when answering my question around the difficulties around pursuing an acting career (interview 3 lines 114 -116):

"Why aren't I listening to them? Why am I not going off and doing something else? Just because I suppose that I kind of know within myself that I can do it."

This resolve baulks against tired conceptions of learning disability as a passive state of being, and instead promotes the idea of a learning disabled person in control of their destiny and willing to face down those who would wish to disagree. Indeed, it points to an activist sensibility which is the last theme I would like to address.

**"We've saved you a space. We'd like to ask you some questions."**

### **Student Activists.**

In the above section activism at the theatre, I suggested that one of the practices at the theatre is raising awareness within the group of artists and students of the issues that are directly affecting their lives. Being surrounded by ideas and artistic works that comment directly on the experience of being labelled learning disabled in a disabilist and ableist society seems to be politicising the

students and encouraging them to speak out against the injustice and inequity they face. Charlton notes the importance of 'self help groups and webs of affiliation' and their ability to 'contribute to the evolution of a necessarily resistant counterculture' (2000 p105), whilst Aspis (1997, p648), talking of the essence and importance of self advocacy notes that it involves:

“Speaking up for yourself; standing up for your rights; making choices; being independent; taking responsibility for oneself.”

This practice is evident in the actions of the students. I faced it myself in the activist panel that sought me out after my initial presentation 'saved' me 'a space' and asked me 'some [brilliant, incisive] questions' about the aims of my research. It also exists in Jackson's fabulous oration of Old Major's speech that created an 'alternative images and language' (Charlton 2000 p 105) out of Orwell's familiar text. The spectre too felt liberated to transmit his disgust at the educational establishments he had been exposed to:

"The second one smelt of soil and the walls were green and red. I got kicked out of there as well."

Tink took aim at the medical profession that was convinced of her inability to dance (interview 1 lines 41-44):

"It was just like: "Right! I can do something here! I can really just prove everyone and science wrong, and actually go out of my comfort zone to make something great."

Whilst Bryan felt able to take on the suggestion of the DWP that he remain at Home Bargains:

"I just don't want to live the nine to five job because I've done that and I hate it." (interview 3 lines 228-229)

His bravery and candour remind me of the eloquence of activists such as Richardson and Bensted who in *Smokescreen*, their rejoinder to the DWP white paper, perceptively note that there is no recognition of how 'work can harm health and how worklessness can benefit health.' (2017 p7) or Ellard (DPAC 2017 p7) who takes aim at 'zealots in the government who've been targeting disabled people' under the misguided notion that they are 'the weakest in society'. Speaking back to those who would subjugate and wish to dominate, Ellard, like the students at the theatre through their collective and individual activity, energy, commitment and resolve answer definitively: "They were wrong."

### **Evidence to support theoretical underpinning**

In this final section I shall look back at the theories I chose to help me describe and understand what I witnessed and took part in at the theatre and assess their utility and suitability with regards to my project. I shall argue that it is reasonable to describe the theatre as a Contact Zone, as described by Pratt (1991), in which daily instances of Transculturation and Autoethnography challenge the 'bureaucratic order' through acts of parrhēsia (the courageous act of speaking truth to power) and attempts to 'fiction history'. For readers who did not wish to engage with the Literature Review, I shall unpack this unwieldy sentence over the course of the next few sections.

### **Foucault: Governmentality**

Foucault's extended engagement with the concept of Governmentality (2007, 2008) proved helpful when understanding how the theatre company interacts with external agencies. To remind readers, Foucault conceived of Governmentality as the 'conduct of conduct' (Dean 2010, p17), that is the practices enacted by governmental and bureaucratic agencies in order to fix, locate and

manage the general population. With reference to the 'conduct of conduct' and my field of interest, governmental and bureaucratic agencies of many flavours seem disposed to believe that they have the final word on the type of lives learning disabled people are allowed to lead. Lives are shaped and directed with little, if any consultation. Instead, directives for living (as described by Foucault) emanate from the 'bureaucratic order'. Directives that are enforced with surveillance, and policed with the threat of possible sanction for non-compliance (i.e. the conditional workfare state which contractually obliges those learning disabled people deemed fit to work to accept jobs, no matter how precarious, repetitive or poorly paid or face the sanction of benefit reduction/removal).

Within my research, Bryan's reference to his continual need to converse with the DWP in an attempt to justify his ongoing participation in a course he clearly loves (Chapter 7) Tink's casual reference to having to get a local MP involved just to secure the funding for a place on the course (Chapter 7) and, most powerfully, the spectre's absence (Chapter 7) speak of this ongoing control and domination.

In response to these acts of governmentality, staff reported acts of resistance. We see it in the excerpts taken from my conversation with the with the Artistic Director (Chapter 5) when they shared with me that the impetus for a large multi-media project was sparked by a lunchtime conversation in The Agora where an artist shared the experience of her learning disabled sister who had recently given birth and whose suitability to be a mother was under investigation by the bureaucratic order. It is there in the narrative shared by the Executive Director (Chapter 6) around her engagement with a particular funding body and her attempts to rectify their Kafkaesque online application portal. It appears again during the narrative of the Creative Engagement Producer (Chapter 6) as she reports her travails in attempting to report outcomes back to funding bodies in

order to secure the final tranche of payments from either the European Social Fund or Youth Music. (Chapter 6).

I saw how precarious the situation is when institutions such as the theatre are reliant on powerful, yet capricious, stakeholders such as arts council, funding bodies or local and central government. But what is at stake was, paradoxically, made most tangible when relating the spectre's absence (*Scene 5 - A Spectre's Monologue* Chapter 7). This was theory brought to life. An instance of the life of a talented learning disabled student being irrevocably altered by the governmental intervention of a local authority that had, for unknown reasons, removed the funding needed for the spectre to continue on the Academy training course.

### **Foucault: Parrhēsia and fictioning history at the theatre**

In the face of the conditions reported above, the theatre, staff, artists and students seem to respond in a way that challenges dominant thinking around the ability of learning disabled people to self-direct and make long term decisions about the type of life they wish to lead. I believe that many of these responses are better understood with reference to Foucault's concept of parrhēsia - the courageous act of speaking truth to power - and his ideas around 'fictioning history'. The former is used by Foucault to describe the courageous act of telling the truth to power. It is 'a way of telling the truth that lays one open to a risk.' (Foucault 2010, p66). Evidence of parrhēsia permeated through the stories told by both staff and students. For instance, the Director of the Performance Academy (Chapter 6) shared the discussion that had taken place between the theatre company and the accrediting university around the importance of replacing the university grading scheme of pass/fail with the grading scheme developed in consultation with the academy students. The risk here being that the university in question could have refused to accede to their requests and refused to accredit the course. Likewise, the Executive Director discusses her prolonged critique of



*Grantium*, the Arts Councils application portal, a risky act when trying to keep important stakeholders and funders onside.

On the students' side, the clearest expressions of parrhēsia come both in Jackson's monologue (chapter 7) which challenges the ableist status quo, Bryan's continuing engagement (Chapter 7) with the DWP about the type of work he is willing to do and Tink's commitment to dance in the face of the instruction not to do so by 'Science' (Chapter 7). Parrhēsia is also underneath the interaction described in *Scene 3 - The Activist Panel* (Chapter 6) during which a group of students challenged my over-simplification of the language I had used during my recruitment presentation to them. Simpson (2012, p108) suggests that 'parrhēsia emerges as the means by which authority is confronted with a truth that unsettles the present reality.' It would be hard to view/experience the artistic work that is generated, finessed and presented by the students and artists as anything other than this. The beautiful fact of the existence of a metaphorical and literal stage for the presentation of the experiences and ideas of learning disabled people alone 'unsettles the present reality', because in our culture, stages (artistic, political, academic etc.) are only usually given over to non-disabled people. But more than this, in the work that the individual artists are bringing to this stage and audience, 'authority is confronted' by an alternative reading of what it means to be designated as learning disabled in an ableist, species typical culture (i.e. Tink dancing, Jackson's Old Major speech or the artists warmup). An alternative reading that refuses to be pliant, or compliant, in its continued subjugation.

With regards to the process of fictioning history, readers of Chapter 2 may recall that Foucault (1980 p193) notes:

"It seems to me that the possibility exists for fiction to function in truth, for a fictional discourse to induce effects of truth, and for bringing it about that a true discourse engenders or 'manufactures'

something that does not as yet exist, that is 'fictions' it. One 'fictions' history on the basis of a political reality that makes it true, one 'fictions' a politics not yet in existence on the basis of a historical truth."

Foucault argues that traditional thinking could be troubled by fiction in two ways. Firstly, by bringing forth stories that contradict or 'fiction' dominant narratives, and secondly through these 'fictions' manufacturing something 'not yet in existence'. Clearly, it is possible to see the entire project of the theatre company as a prolonged effort to produce works of fiction that aim to 'induce effects of truth' and challenge dominant narratives. This can be seen in the multimedia project embarked upon by the theatre (Chapter 5) around the need to rethink how learning disabled mothers are treated by the 'bureaucratic order': through this work aiming to manufacture 'something that does not as yet exist' (i.e. equitable treatment by healthcare professions towards disabled and non-disabled mothers).

This attempt to manufacture 'a politics not yet in existence' is evident in the everyday practices of the theatre whereby learning disability is continually consulted and sometimes deferred to (e.g. the Academy Director discussing student involvement in setting grading criteria, or the Associate Artist in Music asking Jackson to be the ultimate judge as to whether the drumming session has been a success so far - both Chapter 6) in a way that it is rarely deferred to in other settings. A place where cooperation and collaboration in the workplace between disabled people and their non-disabled peers is working hard to reconstitute not only what learning disability can mean and do in modern Britain, but also providing an exemplar of how workplaces can be constructed that match the needs, interests and abilities of both disabled and non-disabled people.

It is also evident in the work produced by the students themselves. Most obviously in Tink's stated mission to 'prove science wrong' (Chapter 7), and her refusal to accept Science's conclusion that she should not dance. But it also appears in the complexity of Bob's guitar piece and Bryan's keyboard compositions, Tom's grasp of Commedia dell'arte and James' engagement with Shakespeare (All Chapter 7). These projects all confound traditional conceptions of what learning disabled people are able to achieve because, in the words of the Partner Program Lead and Access Champion, ableist society still adheres to a misguided 'narrative that people with learning disabilities can't do.' (PPLAC line 337) In this sense their creative endeavour and hard work fiction history, and through their output produce new narratives regarding the capabilities and capacity of learning disabled people. Parrhēsia, the courageous act of speaking truth to power, is undoubtedly working hard in this space to bring 'a politics not yet in existence'; namely, equity of opportunity for learning disabled people in modern society.

### **The theatre and The Contact Zone**

Readers may remember that the concept of the Contact Zone (Pratt 1991) is important to my work. Essentially it is a space of resistance in which less powerful groups and individuals speak back to more powerful groups and individuals using the tools of Transculturation (The act of taking what is given and reworking it) and Autoethnography (The re-writing of the self to produce counter-narratives).

After spending time onsite, I believe that the intellectual and physical space of the theatre (so much a source of pride for those who work within it) can reasonably be understood as a working example of a Contact Zone as defined by Pratt (1991). It is a playful, resistant, activist zone that works to trouble the dominant discourses handed down by more powerful social actors. Evidence that it frequently challenges the status quo is manifest throughout the narratives reported in the previous chapters. The theatre's desire to provide an equitable,

creative place in which learning disabled actors and students can thrive has led it to question conventional thinking around the capacity and capability of learning disabled people, then to question bad practice and suggest progressive solutions. The chief executive talked of her ongoing conversations with The Arts Council around the inaccessibility of its online grant application portal (Chapter 6), The Director of the Performance Academy revealed her discussions with the accrediting university around pass and fail versus improving, achieving, and excelling. The Creative Engagement Producer also talked about her ongoing troubles with other funding pots.

The theatre can also be seen as a place of resistance, another sign of a Contact Zone. It was identified in *Scene 1 - Warming Up* that led to the final assertion that 'the world is ours!' (Chapter 5), in Tink's refusal to accept Science's attempts to curtail her desire to dance (Chapter 7) in the activist panel that challenged my use of oversimplified language when presenting to them (Chapter 6) in Bryan's refusal to return to the 'nine to five', and the world of precarious, repetitive labour at Bargain World (Chapter 7) in Jackson's monologue (Chapter 7) and in the spectre's dismissal of the inadequate educational provision he had experienced (Chapter 7).

Additionally, the practices and processes I witnessed at the theatre company are very much in keeping with the processes described by Pratt (1991) as being indicative of a functioning Contact Zone. One of the processes identified by Pratt is Transculturation which, as readers may remember, is the process of taking elements of what has been handed down by the dominant modes of thinking in any given society and reimagining it for one's own ends. Obvious institutional examples of this would be the academy director's engagement with the accrediting university for the Performance Academy course (Chapter 6), the engagement of the Executive Director with the Arts Council in an attempt to simplify the application process for funding (Chapter 6).

But I suggest that the entire project of the theatre can be seen in terms of transculturation (Pratt 1991, 1995). The theatre itself has taken the traditional idea of what post school training for learning disabled people looks like (underfunded, temporary, piecemeal, poorly matched to individual talents and skills) and, dissatisfied with this ableist conception, began to offer accredited training in a well equipped, professional space. It challenges perceptions that provision for learning disabled people should be an afterthought, and demonstrates what can be achieved if there is a belief in people's capabilities.

Regarding autoethnography, I would suggest that all the creative acts described in the 'Scenes' that populate this work demonstrate a deep commitment to a rewriting of the self in the face of dominant (negative) conceptions. At the heart of this is a sense of the students and artists writing themselves into an existence as trained actors, musicians, dancers. From the bold statement that 'the world is ours!' that ended the warmup, through Bryan's continued interaction with the DWP and Tink dancing 'to prove science wrong', there is a dissatisfaction to the place ableist society has designated for these individuals.

Theorising the space of the theatre (and the interaction it has with external agencies such as funding bodies and government offices) as a Contact Zone is of real worth. It provides a secure base from which (playful) resistance can emerge and challenge the edicts handed down from above. Ideas around who can and can't be mothers, who can and can't speak about the educational provision they are receiving, or of the right of a disabled man to assert that he hates the repetitive and dull work allocated to him by the DWP, can all be accommodated and encouraged in the Contact Zone. It is a liberatory space of possibility and overcoming and provides much opportunity for future theorising around how lasting material differences may be won for learning disabled people.

## **Issues affecting the research**

In his satirical short story, *On Exactitude in Science* (1946), Borges describes a scientific project, that of mapping a fictitious, unnamed empire. The cartographers' desire for exactitude results in a map of ever increasing size that eventually replicates on a 1:1 scale the country it sets out to map, and indeed covers and obscures the territory it set out to chart! Their desire for exactitude results in a scientific object that is by degrees absurd and obsolete. The story serves as a salutary lesson for me and forces me to accept that my work could only ever be a partial and incomplete interpretation of the landscape I viewed at the theatre. However, such recognition is important as it raises the questions of how crucial these absences are to the effectiveness of the thesis. In what follows I shall reflect on issues that affected the work, and how I believe they impacted on the work as a whole.

## **Covid**

A recurring issue of this research arose from the fact that the first half of this research took place against the backdrop of the Covid pandemic and the resultant lockdowns. As stated in the methodology, my time on site was interrupted, particularly around Christmas 2021 when I was poised to begin my research in earnest. This unwelcomed pause prevented me, I felt, from building the rapport with both the staff and the students that I was hoping to achieve. At times the research felt disjointed because, having explained my aims and introduced myself onsite, I would then be absent from site for a protracted period. As so many qualitative researchers (Riessman 1993, Mishler 1986, Atkinson 2015, Van Maanen 2011) note, rapport is an essential part of qualitative research. Especially when attempting to interact with marginalised groups such as young adults with learning disabilities (Hollomotz 2018) I cannot but wonder what conversations, discussions, ideas and actions I missed out during my time on site, and cannot help but reflect that this research may have been strengthened by these omissions.

## **Time Constraints affecting research design**

In my first imaginings this work was to have taken a more participatory approach. At the start of the project, I envisioned employing a wide range of creative methods (i.e. photovoice, student journals, walking interviews etc) in order to give the students a wide variety of options regarding how they wished to communicate their experience at the theatre to me. The repeated interruptions caused by Covid, alongside my unforeseen leave of absence from the research, meant that I had to necessarily, but reluctantly, narrow my data gathering techniques. I felt that there would not be adequate time to adequately inform and instruct the students of the requirements of each technique. Instead, I opted for a single method, that of allowing students to choose a piece of their own work that I would film, that I hoped would still allow the students to choose work that was of significance to them for me to film.

However, this plan was also modified by the decision of the theatre to direct students towards the films taken as part of the accreditation process as the corpus as which to choose from. As discussed in the methodology chapter, I was not party to conversations that led to this decision so I cannot comment upon them. What I do feel though is that there is the real possibility that some students may have chosen different pieces of work to talk about other than the ones already captured by the theatre. This may well have led to alternative avenues of enquiry.

Ultimately, although happy with the rich and engaging data I was fortunate enough to obtain, I would ensure that in any future research I increased the choice of expression to potential participants by introducing a wider range of options from which they could choose.

## **Inability to involve parents and guardians**

Despite sending out information sheets that directly sought to recruit parents/guardians to the research, in the end none chose to participate in the research. I had brief conversations with several parents/guardians where interest in talking and taking part was mooted, but in the end this came to nothing. Again, I feel that the time constraints that began to impose themselves on the work as described above impacted on my ability to focus on this important source of potential information. But I also did not want to impose myself on people who can be expected to have busy lives. I took their silence as a signal that they did not wish to be involved. However, parents and guardians would know better than most of the prejudice and injustice faced by the students during their educational and training experiences and it would have been good to have their input. Additionally, I believe they could also have provided important insights into how the experience offered by the theatre differed from the ones offered in both formal education and prior work experiences. Finally, they might also have been able to provide an important commentary on how the current experience at the theatre was affecting the students.

In the end, as my focus in the research was on the students, staff and the theatre itself I do not think their absence critically undermines my work, but it could only have been enriched by their presence.

## **Final thoughts**

I have used this chapter to consolidate my thoughts about the events and activities I witnessed during my time onsite. I employed self-generated themes to signpost for the reader issues of significance that I feel are indicative of both the processes and practices at the theatre and the experiences of the students participating on the long term training program. Something remarkable is happening at this location. A particular set of conditions have been curated to ensure that learning disabled artists and students are supported and equipped to



produce work that they are heavily invested in. It is a joyful, inclusive, equitable space that deserves recognition and attention for the work it is doing. In the final chapter I shall consider how their good practice may be disseminated and how the ethos and atmosphere of the space may be replicated to the benefit of other individuals with learning disability.

## Chapter 9 - Epilogue

We are underused.

Pavement, *We Are Underused*

I was dressed for success, but success it never comes.

Pavement, *Here*

And a job for each

Every man to his work.

T.S. Eliot, *Two Choruses from 'The Rock'*

### Chapter overview

This chapter brings the thesis to a close. It will be of interest to readers who want to know my final thoughts upon the project as a whole. I will begin by addressing once again, the themes I developed in the previous chapter and suggesting their contributions to the knowledge base. In particular, I believe that there are both practical and theoretical implications arising from my research and I shall deal with each in turn. I will then make several recommendations that I believe arise from the research and suggest how they could be implemented. Finally, I shall use my concluding remarks to restate my firm conviction that something of real worth is happening within the confines of the theatre company. Within its walls learning disability and ability seem to collaborate and co-operate in a manner rarely seen in society at large, which still seeks to administer to and have control over disabled lives. The theatre points at a more enlightened, equitable future being possible for all learning disabled school leavers. A future that I believe we must agitate for and work hard to achieve.

## **Introduction**

I begin with a caveat. As someone whose theoretical grounding and ethical convictions lies within the hermeneutic (the study of interpretation) tradition, writing a conclusion almost seems either an impossible task or a bad joke. It calls for a surety of place that I do not believe can be located in the social world. A place for writers who think they're right to write about their rightness. As T.E. Hulme suggested, 'all clear cut ideas turn out to be wrong'. Absolute certainty worries me because, as Foucault (1977) reminds us, in the political, governmental age, rightness and power are often inexorably linked. If there is only one, incontrovertible 'Truth', this truth is likely to be constructed by and maintained in the service of dominant modes of thinking. For instance, the dominance of right wing politics in Britain since 1979 has led to a 'correct' and 'clear cut' way in which to think about disability and work. Our contractual, conditional welfare state has worked in tandem with demand side friendly policies (e.g. the scandalous 'reasonable adjustments' clause inserted into the Equality Act - Government Equalities Office 2010) to shut out generations of learning disabled workers from workplaces at the same moment that it has sanctioned and harassed these very same individuals for being unemployed.

Additionally, I am queasy about coming to conclusions about the lives of learning disabled people (unless they have been directly involved in the formation of these conclusions), because it seems to me that countless learning disabled lives have been inexorably damaged by the 'clear cut' conclusions reached by a plethora of experts. In my field of interest, the DWP and its resident experts, reach 'clear cut' conclusion after 'clear cut' conclusion about the worthiness of individuals to receive, or have rescinded, the meagre and insufficient benefits on offer (See either Bryan's testimony or the spectre's monologue in previous chapters). In short, conclusions, and the act of concluding in our current political and economic climate, seem often to have a negative impact on learning disabled

people. With this in mind, I hope the reader may understand, therefore, my reticence to engage with this act.

Set against this reticence, though, is an understanding that I do have a duty, an obligation, to provide a summary of my thoughts and the recommendations I would like to see enacted. The people at the theatre freely shared their time with me and I have to respond to their generosity. Aspis (2021) worries that much research with learning disabled people seems to bring (professional) benefit to the researcher but not the researched. This is expressly *not* my goal, and for me not to give my readings would risk falling into this trap. The work would become an esoteric act of intellectual indulgence rather than the work of provocation that I would like it to be. I believe deeply in the Gramscian notion of praxis - thought and action combining to demand change. I hope that my academic interaction with the processes and practices at the theatre serves as evidence of this allegiance.

I suggest, then, that the research shows that it is possible and desirable to provide a viable alternative to the training provision offered to so many post 16 students with learning disabilities. My work demonstrates that by locating training in a permanent, professional space, staffed with practising theatre professionals and dedicated support workers, student engagement and commitment to the training course (and the theatre itself) remains strong. In short, the students want to train and develop in this workspace. More than this though, the collaborative nature of the training, and the trust the theatre demonstrates it has in the students capabilities seems to be engendering within the students a belief that exciting futures, replete with creativity, activity and possibility are attainable both individually and collectively.

## Contribution to the knowledge base

### Practical contributions.

I believe the research demonstrates the exciting potential that arises from constructing and curating high quality **spaces** with curated **atmospheres** where ability and disability can meet as equal partners. The theatre itself, well built and equipped to a professional standard, plays a strong part in both the ways people identify with the theatre and the work they undertake within its walls. It is a well resourced space where ideas and projects can be instigated and developed to their full potential. The space is stacked with well maintained technical equipment that can be used to develop and augment the students' creative work.

This constructed space of the theatre is a source of pride to those who work within it and contributes to the atmosphere to be found within its walls. The space transmits a commitment and dedication to the people it serves. As such it helps inculcate a sense of **belonging at the theatre**. The pleasure staff, students and artists report getting from working at the theatre is palpable and suggests that it is incumbent upon allies of learning disabled people like myself to agitate for the creation of more spaces like it, dedicated not only to the arts, but across other areas and fields of employment, so that all learning disabled people can train and develop skills that match their interests in conducive, stimulating atmospheres and environments.

Secondly, the theatre serves the needs of the students and artists who access it not only because it is replete with technical equipment, but also with staff who are dedicated to the project of the theatre and who believe deeply in **the possibility of learning disability**. Many staff are practising artists and creatives in their own right, with a deep understanding of both the creative process and the practicalities of turning ideas into concrete pieces of work. In such an environment it is unsurprising that the students talk repeatedly of their

**development during training.** They report being able to stretch themselves artistically. The success of the theatre suggests that we should be looking at ways to ensure that all training environments for people with learning disabilities are staffed with people of a similar ilk, so that other learning disabled students are supported and inspired to achieve their particular training and development goals.

The theatre provides an exemplar of what effective and engaging training programs for learning disabled people can and should look like. That the theatre works is in no small part due to the **cooperation at the theatre** which infuses all elements of daily practice. Staff, students and artists continually consult and collaborate as they set about the daily task of the theatre's work. By doing so, novel interpretations of learning disability, infused with possibility and potentiality emerge, with both artists, students and staff seeming to benefit from the interaction. The ethos of equity, and the deep belief in the need to provide training and development opportunities concomitant with the ones provided to non disabled trainee artists, creates an environment that is continually seeking to be at the vanguard of best practice.

The ongoing work that emanates from the building suggests strongly that ableist conceptions of what learning disabled people are able to achieve professionally are misguided and outdated. The **activism at the theatre** informs the technical, artistic projects that are routinely devised, developed, produced and performed in the building. The work, produced by the artists and **student activists** who call the theatre 'home', speaks to and for the experience of being classed as learning disabled in an ableist society. It is important work made by **independent thinkers** and **decision makers** who wish to comment directly on the conditions they find themselves forced to operate in, whilst simultaneously constructing for themselves more imaginative and exciting futures.

The enjoyment of participating on the course shared by the students, and the reported contrast with their previous experiences of educational and training provision suggest strongly learning disabled people must have the right to refuse training/employment provision if it does not meet the standard which the theatre demonstrates is possible. Their non-disabled peers have a full palette of training options available post school. It is looking increasingly anachronistic (or downright prejudicial) that similar choices are not available to all.

### **Theoretical contributions**

Having looked at the practical contributions of this research I shall now move onto the theoretical contributions held within my work. As Goodley (2019 p976) notes this is important because 'as activism and politics grow scholarly responses to such movements are required.'

The protocols, practices and underlying ethos of the theatre all support Pratt's theoretical descriptions and predictions of what a **Contact Zone** would look like and how one could be expected to function. Pratt (1991) describes the Contact Zone as a place of contestation, dissent and reinvention. A space where 'cultures meet, clash and grapple, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power.' (1991, p34). Despite these 'asymmetrical relations' the ideas of any dominant culture can be challenged through the dual processes of autoethnography and transculturation which Pratt identifies as being present in any given Contact Zone. This research identified at the theatre both acts of **autoethnography**, the process whereby individuals 'engage with representations others have made of them' (Pratt 1991, p35) and **transculturation**, the process by which 'members of subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant culture' (Pratt 1991, p36). My research has demonstrated that this theoretical concept can be of much use when describing the conditions faced by people with learning disabilities and the tools they may employ to push back and challenge these conditions.

Secondly, the theatre suggests that Foucault's ideas around the transformative powers of **parrhēsia** - the courageous act of speaking truth to power - are well formulated. Parrhēsia is the practice whereby 'the one who uses parrhēsia... says everything he has in mind: he does not hide anything, but opens his heart and mind completely to other people through his discourse.' (Foucault 2001, p12). In the work of the students and artists we see a fearlessness (e.g. Jackson's Old Major monologue, Tink dancing, Bryan vs the DWP) to convey their experience to a wider audience through 'the creation of alternative images and language' (Charlton 2000) and, by doing so, challenge received ideas around the place and role of learning disabled people within society. The students' acts of parrhēsia speak of alternative futures where (in reference to the examples above) learning disabled people are installed as equal and valued members of society. Somewhere, for instance, that a learning disabled woman feels able to make independent choices about whether or not she can dance. A place where a learning disabled adult feels able to choose the quality and type of work that they engage in. Parrhēsia is a practice by which to destabilise the present and reveal potentialities for future ideas and activities. As employed onsite, it becomes an elegant tool that is utilised to question dominant thinking and to reimagine what learning disability can mean and do in modern society.

The activities at the theatre also strongly support Foucault's late engagement with the possibility of **fiction** both to 'fiction history' (that is to undermine received understandings of society) and to also 'manufacture that which does not as yet exist' (Foucault 1980, p193). In the words of Simpson (2012 p104), Foucault 'conceives of fictions as having fidelity to the present, while also attempting to elicit transformation in the future.' As described in the analysis chapters much of the work that occurs within and emanates from the theatre seeks to do exactly that: commenting directly on the material conditions



experienced by learning disabled people whilst contesting that different futures are not only possible but eminently preferable to the ones that exist today.

Additionally, the theatre confirms Hall and Wilton's (2011, 2015) suggestions that '**alternative workspaces**', built not on profit and competitive self interest, but rather mutuality and co-operation, are environments in which it is more likely that people with learning disabilities will succeed and thrive. The work undertaken onsite by the students is not for economic benefit, rather for the joy of engaging with creative work in itself. The theatre seems to be a space where the uniformity of working practices that often pervade rationalised, profit focussed workplaces are not in existence. Instead, 'flexible, personalised approaches' (Roulstone, Harrington & Hwang 2014) to each individual's workload allows both staff and students latitude to 'experiment' both with the engagement and delivery of creative work. Students talked about the 'freedom' and 'trust' they felt from the staff regarding being allowed to create and develop their own work. I suggest that this enlightened approach, that aims to fit the work to the worker, rather than expecting the worker to fit the work, seems to be delivering excellent results and should be fostered in other training and development provision for people with learning disabilities.

Taken together, I suggest that the project of the theatre and the people who make it work collectively begins to address Titchkosky's question of 'what would it mean to think disability out from the bureaucratic order it is bounded by today?' (2020 p207). It pragmatically shows how it is possible to carve spaces, both physical and intellectual, for learning disabled people away from the 'bureaucratic order'. A place where people with learning disabilities are not endlessly and panoptically surveilled, assessed and administered, but are allowed time and space instead 'just to be who they are'.

## **Recommendations arising from research**

Surveying the political landscape of modern Britain, Srnicek and Williams (2016) highlight the problem facing progressive thinkers who would wish to enact material change. They argue that, at this moment in time:

‘revolutionary demands appear naive, whilst reformist demands appear futile.’  
(2016, p108)

It is this problematic that must be addressed by those who wish to propose change: tinkering around the margins risks achieving little, whilst arguing for wholesale changes runs the risk of being dismissed as naive and utopian.

It is interesting to note that voices from the right often invoke the word utopia as a shorthand to dismiss progressive politics as puerile, fanciful, ill-considered and naive. Interesting because at the very moment they are denying the possibility of utopias they are in fact inhabiting their own: the neo-liberal, market driven society of individualism and competitive self-interest dreamt up by the Mont Perelin brigade. A heady concoction that was then delivered so efficiently and devastatingly by the intertwined ideological projects of Reaganomics, Thatcherism and Blairism. It does not seem unreasonable to question, then, why this utopia should be allowed whilst others are dismissed as fanciful.

If we can show that alternative utopian ideas can be grounded in a social reality, I believe it may be possible to remove the fanciful lightweight connotations currently attached to the word; instead suffusing it with a power and agency that can suggest new visions of the ways in which individuals with learning disabilities and society at large may live their lives.

Weeks perceptively suggests that material changes for marginalised groups should take the form of a demand. This is because, whilst a plea maintains a power dialectic of supplication, a 'solicitation' from the subjugated to the powerful and a proposal, with its 'aura of neutrality' that can be negated by a 'reasonable' (Slater 2017) rejoinder, a 'demand is excessive, defying what are claimed to be reasonable limits' (2011 p146). I will use the next section, therefore, to make a series of demands. Inspired by the spirit and ethos of the theatre they are intended to be provocative, and their aim is to add towards conversations around how we make society fully equitable for learning disabled people.

### **Full Funding for learning disabled students - a demand**

Equity for learning disabled people in education, training and employment will only arrive if prospective students with learning disabilities have full and unproblematic access to funds in line with their non disabled peers and are not penalised by the hidden costs of disability highlighted by many commentators when attempting to do so (Clifford 2020, Ryan 2019 DPAC 2023). I would recommend that Beyers *Engage to Change* briefing paper to the Welsh Government (2020 online) is revisited, engaged with and expanded upon. It looks, for instance at ring fencing funding for a National Job Coaching Service. I suggest that this could be built upon to propose a National Educational and Training Coaching Service that allocates funds for individuals who wish to develop skills before embarking on work in their chosen profession. A 'reasonable' answer would be that in these straightened economic times this is impossible, but as an old friend of mine, Neil McInroy of The Democracy Collective is fond of saying: "We bailed out the banks Jim. So why can't we bail out the people?"

## **Creation of more permanent spaces - a demand**

A definite, and readily achievable, demand would be to lobby for the immediate creation of more purpose built, permanent spaces for learning disabled individuals and groups that are off the quality and ilk provided at the theatre. After reading the draft of chapter 4, in particular the line where I note that 'no expense seems to have been spared', one of my supervisors commented 'I'm sad to say that this is so unfamiliar to me'. (Private correspondence, Oct 2023) And this is true. Austerity and the continued impoverishment of Brexit have seen services for learning disabled people decimated (Ryan 2019) when they were nearly, in places, already non-existent.

Change is needed. The testimonies from the artists staff and students show that all feel and experience the benefit of being able to call the professional environment of the theatre a permanent home/space. Research shows that learning disabled people repeatedly report being lonely (Callus 2017), and this is supported by research that confirms that many learning disabled people often lead isolated lives (Callus 2017). By contrast, a host of other identities populate the public space (language/cultural institutes, LGBTQ spaces etc), and have permanent spaces in which these identities can be collectively reproduced and strengthened. Providing places (not just of work) expressly for learning disabled people must therefore be on the agenda for any equitable society.

If central government were unwilling, I would urge local councils to think along the lines of the Preston Model (CLES 2023 online), especially its notions around Community Wealth Building, to reimagine how their extensive estates could be refitted and repurposed to include permanent spaces for learning disabled people. This would have the dual outcome of putting learning disabled people into a variety of municipal environments (housing, parks, schools, environmental offices etc), where individuals expressing a desire to work within these respective areas may be able to find their own 'job for all', whilst

simultaneously allowing permanent public spaces, funded directly from the public purse, for learning disabled people to meet and congregate.

Returning to the theatre, it is The Agora that serves as the heart of the building. It is the space where people first arrive and last depart. The atmosphere within the space is overwhelmingly positive. As described in earlier chapters it is a place of action and ideas: a place designed and given over to learning disabled people, whilst simultaneously remaining open and accommodating to all. Light floods into the space and it is filled with the hopes, plans and schemes of the exuberant and creative minds that visit it daily. Here, shielded from the gaze of the 'bureaucratic order', people with learning disabilities are freed 'just to be who they are', sharing stories, experiences, ideas and hopes. The Agora buzzes with conversations and emotions. It is a confident, funny, confrontational space populated by artists, students and their support. There is a sense of belonging and kinship, heightened by the knowledge that all are working on the same page to produce art for, by and about learning disabled people and their experiences in modern Britain. It is a space that must be replicated.

### **Drama investigating work from a learning disabled perspective - a demand**

I would very much like to see a theatre piece developed by the theatre company that explores the attitudes of learning disabled people towards work. The cost of this piece should be paid by the DWP. 'Reasonable' voices may suggest that there are simply not the funds to do this. I would counter by pointing to the 9 billion pound 'resource' budget allocated to the DWP by the Treasury last year (House of Commons Library 30th June 2023) and suggest it could. One less paintballing awayday is unlikely to be missed.

Currently, we only have the word of the government, who recently informed us in their white paper, *Transforming Support: The Health and Disability*

*White Paper* (DWP 2023) that all (disabled) citizens want to work all of the time (apart, of course, from the 10 million plus adults of working age who seem curiously resistant to the panacea of paid work - Office for National Statistics 2023). Set against this is Bryan's repeated insistence that he 'hates' the type of work prescribed for him by the conditional workfare state.

By commissioning dramatic work, I suggest we might get a representative snapshot of what learning disabled people think about work, how they conceive of its place in their lives, and the problems and limitations they experience when attempting to engage with it. Giving a group of learning disabled artists/students the room to develop their own piece addressing their interaction with the world of work would, I believe, provide a space in which those very individuals who are exposed to the vicissitudes of the labour market to talk back and comment upon their experience. It would allow a Foucauldian 'fictioning' of current conceptions of the place and importance of work for disabled people to occur, and could potentially serve as a cultural reference point (Along the lines of Hara's *Goodbye CP*) divested of the cloud of paternalism and moral outrage that usually informs and skews debates around learning disabled people and work.

### **The theatre as a consultancy - a demand**

Something truly remarkable is happening within the space of the theatre. Having seen and heard the care and thought that is behind the ongoing project of the theatre, I recommend that governmental agencies and bureaucratic agencies would do well to visit the site in an attempt to glean its secrets. Clearly this could only be undertaken if the theatre was minded to do so and felt that it would not detract from its day to day business of producing professional theatre and training the next generation of learning disabled artists. If there was the will within the theatre to share its ethos and approach though, which proceeds from the starting point of a deeply held conviction in the capability and exciting potential of people with learning disabilities, I believe the processes and practices evident at the

theatre could do much to inform conversations on what post school training provision for young adults with learning disabilities could look and feel like. The commitment to provide professional training to the highest standards leads to a continual evaluation and re-evaluation of daily practice: a restless desire to meet the needs of the students is clearly in operation at the theatre and I recommend that time is spent on formulating how this can be replicated at other sites.

### **Artists and students as consultants - a demand**

The continued engagement by the learning disabled students and artists who continue to train and work at the theatre results in a seemingly endless stream of work that speaks directly to and for the experience of being a learning disabled person in modern Britain. The ongoing success of individual and collective projects speaks of a group of workers who have found employment that tightly matches their interests. This is in direct contrast with the experience of many learning disabled people who have not managed to find programs that are sympatico with their requirements. If we are to create more training and employment opportunities for a wide range of people with learning disabilities, in order to create equity of opportunity for all school leavers, it is vital that their stories are heard by the governmental bodies and bureaucratic agencies. This is preferable to the current approach that seems to develop policy without consultation with the people that the policies will directly affect (e.g. the ongoing reticence of the DWP to state what will replace The Work Capability Assessment).

My direct experience at the theatre (especially my interaction with the activist panel) reminded me of the ability of many learning disabled people to advocate and advise on behalf of their peers. Indeed, during my time at the theatre I was impressed by the manner in which individuals were able to reflect on their current situation and propose alternative solutions (e.g. Tink challenging the conclusions the medical profession made regarding her ability to dance, or Bryan contesting the DWP's suggestion that he should look no further than a job at

Home Bargains). I believe that this talent should not be wasted, and would highly recommend that, building on the role of the Co-Facilitator external agencies should be encouraged to employ people with learning disabilities on a consultation basis (naturally with requisite, industry standard remuneration), especially when designing programs and policies that directly affect the lives of people with learning disability. The theatre is already encouraging its artists to think of ways of generating income away from the stage in order that individuals' artistic careers can be made sustainable. This would be one way in which anyone interested in working outside the artistic sphere could begin to investigate alternative sources of employment (and income).

### **Final remarks**

Rather helpfully Pavement do not qualify who they believe are 'underused' in the eponymous song quoted at the start of this chapter. I am therefore able to suggest that they could well have been referencing the problematic *vis a vis* learning disability and work. Certainly, the continued, deleterious figures around the percentages of learning disabled people in work compared to their non-disabled peers (DWP Jan 2023) suggest that this is the case. 'Underused' because the typical, ableist, neo liberal workplace (secure behind, for example, the 'reasonable adjustments' clause) continues to work hard to eliminate difference from its premises at the very same time that a conditional workfare state harasses those unable to enter the workplace.

Additionally, and paradoxically, the latest employment figures (DWP Jan 2023) also point to the fact that many learning disabled people have learnt that 'success it never comes' despite the fact that they have allegedly been, according to every education secretary over the past decade, 'dressed for success' during their progression through formal education. The 'bureaucratic order' must be held to account for its failure to equip generation after generation of learning disabled students for the cold realities of what awaits them post school. It would



almost be comical to think that it is this same 'bureaucratic order' that then persecutes school leavers with learning disabilities for being ill equipped for the jobs market were it not for the precarity, anguish and danger this dereliction of duty brings to many people's lives. Unchecked, this same 'bureaucratic order' will continue to employ technologies of censure, observation and sanction across the lifespan of generations of learning disabled individuals. We must agitate for it to stop.

Tomlinson (2017) rightly identifies the 'SEN cliff edge' that she sees placed before students transitioning from formal education. From this relatively well funded arm of the public sector, young adults with learning disabilities often, suddenly, find themselves at the mercy of whatever social care provision their local council can supply. That the cliff edge exists I do not doubt. Unfortunately, during my time as a TA in a SEND school I saw too many promising students forced, through lack of provision, to look over its precipice. Indeed, this experience was formative in driving my return to academia. I was, and am still, keen to know how this endless cycle of bad practice can be stopped.

Currently, conceptions of learning disability based on lack and inability are still dominant. Attitudes that can only conceive of the capacity of learning disabled people with reference to deficit. But projects like the theatre 'fiction' these tired conceptions and 'manufacture' new, positive, self assertive narratives that emerge through the daily work of the theatre; individuals and groups, colleagues, peers and friends working hard to craft creative work that endlessly 'fictions' old ideas of what training for people with learning disabilities can look like, and what learning disabled students can produce and achieve.

Such processes have clearly been underway for some time at the theatre. Deep listening, thought and action have combined to curate a particular space in which one important goal, alongside the provision of professional accredited

training, seems to be 'just to let them be who they are'. Simple support mechanisms and structures (created in consultation with artists and students) combine with a company wide ethos built upon principles of equity and inclusion. In this way, individuals who have previously struggled in learning and training environments are supported in the work of their creative endeavour. In this invested, busy space artists and students manifest Eliot's idea of 'every man to his work'. Because work is most certainly what is being forged within the reclaimed spaces of the theatre. It is just that it looks unlike the poorly paid, repetitive, precarious work that learning disabled people are expected to undertake. Instead, the artists and students have been freed to investigate what exactly their work is. To define it for themselves, and reject that which is not wanted.

Within the theatre, too, Eliot's maxim of 'a job for all' is evident. Initially students and artists are shown the possibilities for careers within music, drama and movement, but the theatre also is a place, where through co-operation and co-facilitation learning disabled artists and students are introduced to a variety of technical and professional roles. This allows for the possibility of a student entering the theatre with ideas of becoming a performer, but getting side tracked to work within arts admin, or finding out their talents lie in teaching or mentoring others. 'A job for all' indeed.

The extraordinary happens every day in this building. Learning disabled artists, students and staff develop, devise, produce and perform artworks that confound limited, ableist perceptions of people with learning disabilities. Inside the building the students and artists are provided with a professional, permanent space in which to engage with work that truly matters to them; namely, the work of becoming artists. Unsurprisingly, allowing people to train in an area that interests them results in positive outcomes: the theatre is a source of an outpouring of work that reflects on the implications of being labelled 'learning disabled' in an ableist society.

In short, these students and artists are working hard and should be rewarded for their endeavours. Not forced to engage local MP's simply to get the funds to access the course in the first place, harassed throughout their training journey to find real work, or excluded altogether. They hold the same right as their non-disabled peers to have uncomplicated access to the training that their skills and interest matches.

We are back, I believe, to Eliot's (citation) suggestion of 'each man to his work.' Work is most often experienced by people as already prescribed and delineated. The worker is simply expected to fit the work. But 'each man' should have the right to define what work looks and feels like for themselves, rather than be designated it by another, and certainly should have the ability to do so freed from the threat of sanction or reprimand. What was refreshing about the theatre was seeing the effect of this sentiment when it was put into practice. For too long people with learning disabilities have not been in control of many facets of their lives, including decisions taken on their behalf concerning their aptitude and ability to work. At the theatre this is not the case, with the students and artists having licence to derive and execute work that is meaningful to them and draws on their skills and abilities. Unsurprisingly this results in a group of people who work hard daily, because they are invested in each project from inception.

And indeed, I would suggest that it is this investment, this interest, that each prospective trainee with learning disabilities must be allowed to articulate and pursue. The bureaucratic, governmental order must be challenged whenever it attempts to enforce the 'right' (i.e. state sanctioned) sort of work onto learning disabled people. Like their non disabled peers they must be freed to choose: a) whether they wish to engage with the world of work in the first place and b) if so freed, like their non-disabled peers, to choose the sort of work that appeals to them. Goodley (2017) introduced us to 'Dwayne' a young adult with learning

disabilities who has discovered his *métier* from his interest and skills at crushing and recycling plastic bottles and cans. Like the students and artists in this research his passion has been nurtured to become his profession. His work may not be for all (like the actors and trainees at the theatre) but crucially it is *his* work. A work that he willingly undertakes. This has to be the template for prospective students, trainees and workers with learning disabilities to follow.

Additionally, the activism I found alive and working in artists, students and staff, an activism that manifests itself as a disappointment, frustration, incredulity and anger at the way in which learning disability continues to be conceived, addressed, supported and administered by the state and other bureaucratic agencies - informs efforts to ensure that, for people like Bryan, James, Bob, Tink and Tom, expectations to 'do the dirty work' can be circumvented. It is clear to me that more places like this need to be established where learning disabled people are given the time and space to develop their own talents and interests, much akin to the opportunities currently offered to their non-disabled peers.

However, at this juncture, it is time to draw this piece to a close. Although, outside the walls of the theatre, the prospects for young adults with learning disability still seem parlous, Graeber's quote reminds us that it is possible for us to agitate and 'make differently' (2015 p121) the material conditions that currently face learning disabled people. Rather than being understood as fixed and unmoving we should see the barriers and restrictions, the directives and sanctions, the technologies and protocols of the 'bureaucratic order' as chimaeras created expressly to control, administer and dominate learning disabled people. A father knows best approach, built upon the false cognition that all people with learning disabilities are unable to direct their own lives. They can, and must, be reconfigured.

In modern Britain it is imperative that spaces are found in which learning disabled people can pause, reflect and begin to find ways of pushing back against that which the 'bureaucratic order' delivers upon them. Spaces such as the one found at the theatre: a bold, confident, self assured place that functions as a Contact Zone; simultaneously provoking and questioning what is handed down from governmental agencies, whilst providing a safe harbour in which artists and students can train and work in permanent and professional surroundings.

A place where learning disabled people feel able to declare that 'the world is ours' (Scene 1 - *Warming up*), or where Orwell's words can be reappropriated to comment directly on the continued exclusion and marginalisation of learning disabled people from society (Scene 4 - *Jackson and Old Major*). Somewhere a group of students are able to self organise, convene and challenge the motives behind this research (Scene 3 - *The Activist Panel*) and a spectre can highlight their mistreatment at the hands of the educational system, haunt it and call it to account (Scene 5 - *A Spectre's monologue*). A space where conditions allow a group of learning disabled artists to reflect and respond to the climate emergency (Scene 1 - *Warming up*) and where a learning disabled artist can lead a session for a visiting group of students (Scene 2 - *The Drumming Lesson*). An environment where a young woman can reimagine herself as a dancer and contest the limitations placed upon her by the medical profession (Chapter 7 - *Tink and the act of 'proving science wrong'*), and in which the judgement and the prescription of the DWP can be called out and challenged (Chapter 7- *Bryan and the Contact Zone*).

A physical, intellectual and creative space curated to allow works of autoethnography and transculturation, that talk back to ableist thinking, to appear. Works of parrhêsia that are courageous in their disavowal of the tired representation of learning disability that dominates society. Works that 'fiction history' by questioning dominant discourses and works that aim to 'manufacture'

new modes of being for people with learning disability. Alternative, equitable, futures that remake, remodel and reimagine what learning disability can mean and do in modern society. A space where difference is celebrated and the instinct 'just to let them be who they are' strong.

## Bibliography

Abberley, P. (1999). The significance of work for the citizenship of disabled people. Retrieved April 2021 from the *The Disability Archive: Leeds University* . Available at <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Abberley-sigofwork.pdf>

Acemoglu, D & Restrepo, P. (2019). Automation and New Tasks: How Technology Displaces and Reinstates Labour. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*. 33(2) pp3-30

All Parliamentary Group on Health in All Policies (2021). *Five Years On: The Health Effects of the 2016 Welfare Reform and Work Act on Children and Disabled People*. Published online 22/2/2021. Available at <https://debbieabrahams.org.uk/five-years-on-the-health-effects-of-the-2016-welfare-reform-and-work-act-on-children-and-disabled-people/> Retrieved February 2021

Allan, J. (1996). Foucault and Special Educational Needs: A 'box of tools' for analysing children's experiences of mainstreaming. *Disability and Society*. 11(2) pp 219-234

Allan, J. (2011). Complicating, Not Explicating: Taking Up Philosophy In Learning Disability Research. *Learning Disability Quarterly*. 34(2) pp153-161

Allen, B. (2015). Foucault's Nominalism. In S. Tremain ed., *Foucault and the Government of Disability (2nd Ed.)* pp93-107. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Amin, A. (2009): Extraordinarily ordinary: working in the social economy. *Social Enterprise Journal*. 5(1) pp30-49

Apostolidis, P. (2019). *The Fight For Time: Migrant Day Labourers and the Politics of Precarity*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Armstrong, A., Cansdale, M., Collis, A.R., Collis, B.E., Rice, S., Walmsley, J. (2019) What makes a good self advocacy project? The added value of co-production. *Disability and Society* 34:7 p1289-1311

Aspis, S. (1997) Self-advocacy for People with Learning Difficulties: Does it have a future? *Disability and Society* 12(4) p647-654

Aspis, S. (2021) Why are disabled people with learning difficulties being prevented from leading campaigns, projects and initiatives? *Disability and Society*. 37(1) pp154-159

Atkinson, D. (1997) *An Auto/biographical Approach to Learning Disability Research*. Aldershot: Ashgate

Atkinson, P. (2006). *Everyday Arias: An Operatic Ethnography*. Oxford:Altamira Press

Atkinson, P. (2015). *For Ethnography*. London: Sage

Atkinson, P. (2017): *Thinking Ethnographically*. London: Sage

Atkinson, P. (2020): *Writing Ethnographically*. London: Sage

Auden, W. H. (1989). *The English Auden. Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*. London: Faber

Barthes, R. (1977): *Music, Image, Text*. London: Fontana Press

Barthes, R. (2009). *Mythologies*. London: Vintage

Barthes, R. (2010). *The Grain of the Voice*. London: Vintage

British Association for Supported Employment - BASE (2020). Engage to Change briefing: Policy changes needed in Wales. <https://www.base-uk.org/knowledge/engage-change-briefing-policy-changes-needed-wales> Retrieved January 2024

Bates, K., Goodley, D., Runswick-Cole, K. (2017) Precarious lives and resistant possibilities: the labour of people with learning disabilities in times of austerity. *Disability and Society*. (32:2 p160-175)

Bauman, Z. (2000) Sociological Enlightenment: For Whom, About What? *Theory, Culture and Society* 17(2) pp71-82



- Bauman, Z. (2005). *Work, consumerism and the new poor*. Maidenhead: Open University Press
- Bauman, Z. (2007). *Consuming Life*. Bristol: Polity Press
- Becker, H.S. (1982): Culture: A Sociological View. *Yale Review* 71: 513-27
- Bentham, J. (2011). *The Panopticon Writings*. London: Verso
- Berardi F. (2019). *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*. London: Verso
- Berlant, L. (2011). *Cruel Optimism*. Durham: Duke University Press
- Beyer, S., Meek, A & Vigna, E. (2020). Engage to Change briefing: What policy changes are required to provide people with a learning disability or ASD equal access to the labour market in Wales? [https://www.base-uk.org/sites/default/files/knowledgebase/National%20Job%20Coach%20Briefing%206July20%20V6\\_final.pdf](https://www.base-uk.org/sites/default/files/knowledgebase/National%20Job%20Coach%20Briefing%206July20%20V6_final.pdf) Retrieved online November 2022
- Bhatt,N. & Gentile J.P. (2021): Interviewing Techniques for Patients with Intellectual Disability. *Journal of Mental Health Disorders*. 1(1):10-14
- Blakie, N. (2004): Abduction. In M.S. Lewis-Beck, A. Bryman & T.F. Liao eds, *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.C. (2013) *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London:Sage
- Blakie, N. (2010): *Designing social Research 2nd ed*. Cambridge: Polity Press
- Booth, T. & Booth, W. (2003). Self-Advocacy and Supported Learning for Mothers with Learning Disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disabilities*. 7(2) p165-193
- Booth, T. & Booth, W. (2003): In the Frame: Photovoice and mothers with learning difficulties. *Disability and Society*. 18(4): p431-442
- Borges, J.L. (2001). *A Universal History of Iniquity*. London: Penguin

- Borsary, A. (2004). *Disability and Social Policy in Great Britain since 1750*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan
- Bourdieu, P. (2010). *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*. London: Routledge
- Bourdieu, P., Passeron, J.C. (2013). *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*. London: Sage
- Braun, V. (2015). Thematic Analysis. *Journal of Positive Psychology*. Published online 31st Jan 2015  
[https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/43968/Thematic%20analysis\\_Journal%20Positive%20Psychology\\_ACCEPTED..pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y](https://researchspace.auckland.ac.nz/bitstream/handle/2292/43968/Thematic%20analysis_Journal%20Positive%20Psychology_ACCEPTED..pdf?sequence=4&isAllowed=y) Retrieved Jan 2024
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In: Cooper, H., Camic, P.M., Long, D.L., Panter, A.T., Rindskopf, D., Sher, K.J. (eds.) *APA Handbook of Research Methods in Psychology, Research Designs, vol. 2*, pp. 57–71. Washington: American Psychological Association
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. Thousand Oaks: Sage
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2014). Thematic analysis. In: Teo, T. (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology*. pp. 1947– 1952 New York: Springer
- Braun, V., Clarke, V. (2019). Reflecting on reflexive thematic analysis. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health* 11(4) pp589– 597
- Braun, V., Clarke, V.: One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. Published online 12th Aug 2020 <https://doi.org/10.1080/2159676X.2019.1628806> Retrieved January 2024
- Bremner, N. (2020). Time for Timelines: The Take-Home Timeline as a Tool for Exploring Complex Life Histories. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*. 19 p1-13
- Brinkman, S. & Kvale, S. (2018). *Doing Interviews*. London: Sage

British Association of Supported Employment - BASE (2020). *Learning disability employment rates fall to 5.6%*. Published online 10/12/20 <https://www.base-uk.org/news/learning-disability-employment-rates-fall-56> Retrieved April 2021

Bruner, J. (2004): *Life as Narrative*. *Social Research*. 71(3): p 691-710

Bryman, A. (2015) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Buber, M. (2013). *I and Thou*. London: Bloomsbury Academic

Byrne, B. (2004): *Qualitative Interviewing*. In C.Searle (ed), *Researching Society and Culture, 2nd Edition*. London: Sage pp 179-192

Byrne, D. (2022). A worked example of Braun and Clarke's approach to reflexive thematic analysis. *Quantity and Quality* 56 pp1391-1412

Burchell, G., Gordon, C. & Miller, P. (1991) *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Callus, A.M. (2017). 'Being friends means helping each other, making coffee for each other': reciprocity in the friendships of people with intellectual disability. *Disability and Society* 32(1) 1-16

Campbell, F.K. (2009). *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Aabledness*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Campbell, F.K. (2017). *Queer Anti-sociality and Disability Unbecoming an Ableist Relations Project*. In O. Sircar & D. Jain (ed) *New Intimacies/Old Desires: Law, Culture and Queer Politics in Neoliberal Times*. New Dehli: Zuban Books p280-316

Campbell, F.K. (2019). Precision Ableism: a *studies in ableism* approach to developing histories of disability and abledment. *Rethinking History*. 23(2) pp 138-156

Carpenter, N. (2018) *Austerity's Victims*. Great Britain: Amazon

Centre For Welfare Reform (2013). *The People's Review of the Work Capability Assessment: Further Evidence*. Published online December 2013

<https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/410/the-peoples-review-of-wca-further-evidence.pdf> Retrieved June 2021

Charlton, J. (2000). *Nothing About Us Without Us: Disability, Oppression and Empowerment*. Berkley: University of California Press

Charmaz, K. (2006): *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide Through Qualitative Analysis*. London: Sage

Clark, T. (2008) We're Over-Researched Here! Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue Within Qualitative Research Engagements. *Sociology* 42(5) p953-970

Centre For Local Economic Strategies -CLES (2023): *The Preston Model*. Online. <https://cles.org.uk/the-preston-model/>

Clifford, E. (2020) *The War On Disabled People: Capitalism, Welfare and the Making of a Human Catastrophe*. London: Zed

Clough, P. (2002): *Narratives And Fictions In Educational Research*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Cluley, V., Pilnik, A. & Fyson, R. (2022). Talking about learning disability: Discursive acts in managing an ideological dilemma. *SSM - Qualitative Research In Health*. Volume 2

Cohen, J. (2018). *Not Working: Why We Have To Stop*. London: Granta

Cooper, J. (2018). *The Met Stop: Investigating the experience of Special Educational Needs students engaged on a long term work placement*. Manchester University: Unpublished

Cramm, J.M., Finkenflügel, R., Kuijsten, R. And van Exel, N.J.A, (2009). How employment support and social integration programmes are viewed by the intellectually disabled. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research*. 53(6) 512-520

Cross, R.M. & Warwick-Booth, L. (2016). Using storyboards in participatory research. *Nurse Researcher* 23(3) p8-24

Dean, M. M. (2010). *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern Society* (2nd Ed.) London: Sage

Debord, G. (1955): *Introduction to a Critique of Urban Geography*.  
[https://chisineu.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/biblioteca\\_introduction\\_debord.pdf](https://chisineu.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/biblioteca_introduction_debord.pdf) Retrieved January 2024

Deleuze, G. & Guattari, F. (1987): *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Department for Education (2022): *Guidance: Political Impartiality in schools*. Published online 17th February 2022.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/political-impartiality-in-schools/political-impartiality-in-schools> Retrieved November 2023

Department for Work and Pensions (2016). *Improving Lives: The work, Health and Disability Green Paper*. London: HM Government

Department for Work and Pensions (2023). *Employment of Disabled People 2022*. Published Online 26th Jan 2023.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/the-employment-of-disabled-people-2022/employment-of-disabled-people-2022>

Department for Work and Pensions (2023) *Transforming Support: The Health And Disability White Paper*. Published online, 16th March 2023.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/transforming-support-the-health-and-disability-white-paper/transforming-support-the-health-and-disability-white-paper#executive-summary>

Derrida, J. (2006). *Spectres of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning and the New International*. London: Routledge

Disability News Service (2023). *DWP blocks release of document that shows impact of scrapping 'fit for work' test*. Published online 27th April, 2023

<https://www.disabilitynewsservice.com/dwp-blocks-release-of-document-that-shows-impact-of-scrapping-fit-for-work-test/#:~:text=The%20scrapping%20of%20the%20work,the%20discretion%20of%20work%20coaches.>

Disabled People Against The Cuts - DPAC (2023). DPAC Policy Statement. <https://dpac.uk.net/about/dpac-policy-statement/> Retrieved online December 2023

Disability Rights UK (2020): *Nearly half of everyone in poverty is either a disabled person or lives with a disabled person*. Published online 6th Feb 2020. <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2020/february/nearly-half-everyone-poverty-either-disabled-person-or-lives-disabled-person>

Disability Rights UK (2022). *DWP ignored 'hugely alarming' research that linked WCA with 600 suicides, MPs are told*. Published online 27th June 2022 <https://www.disabilityrightsuk.org/news/2022/june/dwp-ignored-%E2%80%98hugely-alarming%E2%80%99-research-linked-wca-600-suicides-mps-are-told#:~:text=Professor%20Barr%20was%20one%20of,suicides%20in%20just%20three%20years>.

Dyble, M., Thorley, J., Page, A.E., Smith, D. & Migliano, A.B. (2019). Engagement in agricultural work is associated with reduced leisure time among Agta hunter-gatherers. *Nature Human Behaviour* (3, p792-796)

Eastmond, M. (2007): Stories as Lived Experience: Narratives in Forced Migration Research. *Journal of Refugee Studies*. 20(2): p248-264

Eliot, T.S. (1999). *The Waste Land and other poems*. London: Faber

Emerson, R.M., Fretz, R.I. & Shaw, L.L. (2011): *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes 2nd ed*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Entitledto.co.uk (2021). *£15+ billion unclaimed means-tested benefits - but the sketchy take-up data makes it hard to say for sure*. Published online January 5th 2021 <https://www.entitledto.co.uk/blog/2021/january/15plus-billion-unclaimed-means-tested-benefits-but-the-sketchy-take-up-data-makes-it-hard-to-say-for-sure/> Retrieved June 2021

Fetterman, D.M (2020): *Ethnography*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Fisher, M. (2009). *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* London: Zero

Fisher, M. (2014). *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology and Lost Futures*. London: Zero

Fisher, M. (2015). *No More Miserable Monday Mornings*. Published online Sat July 18th, 2015. <https://k-punk.org/no-more-miserable-monday-mornings/>

Foley, L.J. (2012): *Constructing The Respondent*. In J.F. Gubrium et al (eds), *The SAGE Handbook of Interview Research: The Complexity of The Craft*. Thousand Oaks: Sage pp305-316

Fontana, A. & Prokos, A.H. (2007): *The Interview: From Formal To Postmodern*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press

Foucault, M. (1977). *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of The Prison*. London: Penguin

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. New York: Vintage Books

Foucault, M. (1991). *Remarks on Marx*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)

Foucault, M. (1993): *Madness and Civilisation: A History Of Insanity In The Age Of Reason*. London: Routledge

Foucault, M. (2001). *Fearless Speech*. Los Angeles: Semiotext[e]

Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures At The Collège De France*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Foucault, M. (2008). *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures At The Collège De France*. Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan

Foucault, M. (2010). *The Government of Self and Others: Lectures at The Collège De France*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Foucault, M (2011). *The Courage of Truth. Lectures at The Collège De France*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan

Foucault, M. (2020). *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the College De France 1975-76*. London: Penguin

Frayne, D. (2015). *The Refusal of Work: The Theory & Practice of Resistance to Work*. London: Zed

Frère, P. (2017). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. London: Penguin

Gadamer, H.G. (2013). *Truth and Method*. London: Bloomsbury Revelations

Garthwaite, K. (2011). The language of shirkers and scroungers? Talking about illness, disability and coalition welfare reform. *Disability and Society*. 26:3 p369-372

Goffman, E. (1974): *Frame Analysis: An essay on the organisation of experience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Goffman, E. (1990). *Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity*. London: Penguin

Goodley, D. (2017). *Disability Studies. An Interdisciplinary Approach*. London: Sage

Goodley, D., Lawthom, R & Runswick-Cole, K. (2014). Dis/ability and austerity: beyond work and slow death. *Disability and Society*. 29:6 p980-984

Goodley, D., Lawthom, R., Liddiard, K., Runswick-Cole, K. (2019) Provocations for Critical Disability Studies. *Disability and Society* 34(6) p 972-997

Goodley, D. & Runswick-Cole, K. (2012). Reading Rosie. The Postmodern Disabled Child. *Educational and Child Psychology*. 29:2 p53-66

Goodley, D. & Runswick-Cole, K. (2013). The body as disability and possibility: theorising the 'leaking, lacking and excessive' bodies of disabled children. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*. 15:) p1-19

Goodley, D. & Runswick-Cole, K. (2106). becoming dishuman: thinking about the human through disability. *Discourse: Studies In The Cultural Politics Of Education*. 37(1) p1-15



Goodson, I. & Sikes, P. (2010): *Life History Research In Educational Settings: Learning From Lives*. Maidenhead: Open University Press

Government Equalities Office (2010). *Equality Act 2010: Duty on employers to make reasonable adjustments for their staff*. Published online 2010. Available at [https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/138118/Equality\\_Act\\_2010\\_-\\_Duty\\_on\\_employers\\_to\\_make\\_reasonable\\_adjustments\\_for....pdf](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/138118/Equality_Act_2010_-_Duty_on_employers_to_make_reasonable_adjustments_for....pdf) Retrieved April 2021

Gov.uk (2023).: Personal Independence Payment (PIP). Published online. <https://www.gov.uk/pip>

Graeber, D. (2015). *The Utopia of Rules: On Technology, Stupidity and the Secret Joys of Bureaucracy*. Brooklyn: Melville House Publishing

Gramsci, A. (2003) *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart

Grover, C. & Piggott, L. (2015). *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is employment really the answer?* Bristol: Policy Press

The Guardian (2020). *At Least 69 suicides linked to DWP's handling of benefit claims*. Published online 7th February 2020  
<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/feb/07/dwp-benefit-related-suicide-numbers-not-true-figure-says-watchdog-nao> Retrieved August 2021

Guba, E & Lincoln, Y.S. (1994): Competing Paradigms in Qualitative Research. In N.K. Denzin and Y.S. Lincoln (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Hall, E. (2010) Spaces of Social Inclusion and Belonging for People with Intellectual Disabilities. *Journal of Intellectual Disability Research* 54(1) p 48-57

Hall, E. & Wilton, R. (2011) Alternative spaces of work and inclusion for disabled people. *Disability and Society* 26(7) 867-880

Hall, E. & Wilton, R. (2015). Thinking differently about work and social inclusion for disabled people. In C. Grover & L. Piggott ed., *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is employment really the answer?* pp219-238. Bristol: Policy Press

Hara, K. (1972). *Goodbye CP*. Japan: Shisso Production

Heap, D. (2015). Disabled People, welfare reform and the balance of rights and responsibilities. In C.Grover & L.Piggott ed. *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is employment really the answer?* Bristol: Policy Press

HMRC (2023). *Number of Live Corporate Criminal Offences Investigations*. Updated 27th July 2023.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/number-of-live-corporate-criminal-offences-investigations/number-of-live-corporate-criminal-offences-investigations>. Retrieved December 2023

Hollomotz, A. (2018) Successful interviews with people with intellectual disability. *Qualitative Research*. 18(2) p 153-170

House of Commons Library (2021). *Service Industries: Key Economic Indicators*. Published 24/3/21. Available at

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/sn02786/>. Retrieved April 2021

House of Commons Library (2023): *Disabled People in Employment*. Published online Monday 19th June, 2023

<https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/#:~:text=5.15%20million%20working%20Dage%20disabled,are%20not%20disabled%20was%2082.7%25>. Retrieved October 2023

House of Commons Library (2023): *Estimates Day Debate: The Spending of The Department For Work And Pensions*. Published online 30th June 2023

<https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CDP-2023-0154/CDP-2023-0154.pdf> Retrieved October 2023

Hulme, T.E. (1987). *Speculations: Essays on Humanism and the Philosophy of Art*. London: Routledge

Hunt, J. (2019) *No Limits: The Disabled People's Movement - A Radical History*. Great Britain: TBR Imprint

Hunt, P. (1972) Letter to *The Guardian* - Wednesday 20th September, 1972. <https://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/library/Hunt-Hunt-1.pdf> Retrieved June 2021

Ilzetzki, E. (2020). If the UK is high tech, why is productivity growth slow? Economists weigh in. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/businessreview/2020/03/07/if-the-uk-is-high-tech-why-is-productivity-growth-slow-economists-weigh-in>

Imrie, R. (2001). Barriered and Bounded Places and the Spatialities of Disability. *Urban Studies*. 38(2) p231-237

Imrie, R. & Kumar, M.(1998). Focusing on Disability and Access in the Built Environment. *Disability and Society* 13(3) p357-374

Innes, D. (2020). *What has driven the rise of in-work poverty?* Published online 7.2.20 <https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/what-has-driven-rise-work-poverty> Retrieved June 2021

Jaffe, S. (2021). *Work Won't Love You Back: How Devotion to Our Jobs Keeps Us Exploited, Exhausted and Alone*. London: C. Hurst & co.

Jarrett, S. (2020): *Those They Called Idiots*. London: Reaktion

Johnston, K. (2016) *Disability Theatre and Modern Drama: Recasting Modernism* London: Bloomsbury

King, N. & Horrocks, C. (2010): *Interviews in Qualitative Research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage

Klein, B.S. (2002): *Art Smarts: Inspiration and Ideas for Canadian Artists with Disabilities*. Vancouver: Society for Disability Arts and Culture

Leech, B.L. (2002): Asking Questions: Techniques for Semistructured Interviews. *Political Science and Politics*. 35(4): 665-668

Lemke, T. (2019). *Foucault's Analysis of Modern Governmentality: A Critique of Political Reason*. London: Verso

Lewis, A. & Porter, J. (2004): Interviewing children and young people with learning disabilities: guidelines for researchers and multi-professional practice. *British Journal of Learning Disabilities* 32, 191-197

Loots, G., Coppets, K. & Sermijn, J. (2017). Practicing a Rhizomatic Perspective in Narrative Research. In M. Andrews, C. Squire & M. Tamboukou (eds), *Doing Narrative Research*. (p108-125). Thousand Oaks: Sage

Lorey, I. (2015). *State of Insecurity. Government of the Precarious*. London: Verso

Lyotard, J.F. (1984): *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Manchester: Manchester University Press

Lyotard, J.F. & Thébaud, J.L (1986). *Just Gaming*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Machiavelli, N. (2003). *The Prince*. London: Penguin

MacIntyre, A. (1981): *After Virtue*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press

McVilly, K.R., Stancliffe, R.J., Parmenter, T.R. & Burton-Smith, R.M. (2006) "I get by with a little help from my friends.": Adults with Intellectual Disability Discuss Loneliness. *Journal of Applied Research in Intellectual Disabilities*. 19(2) p 191-203

Mehta, J., Taggart, D., Clifford, E., Speed, E. (2021). "They say jump,, we say how high?" conditionality, sanctioning and incentivising disabled people into the UK labour market. *Disability and Society*. 36(5) pp681-701

Mills, C. & Pring, J. (2023) Weaponising time in the war on welfare: slow violence and deaths of disabled people within the UK's social security system. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/02610183231187588> Published online 2023, Retrieved November 2023.

Minich, J.A. (2016). Enabling Whom? Critical Disability Studies Now. *Lateral* 5(1) <https://doi.org/10.25158/L5.1.9>

Mishler, E. (1986). *Research Interviewing: Context and Narrative*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press

Mitchell, D.T. & Snyder, S.L. (2015). *The Biopolitics of Disability: Neoliberalism, Ablenationalism and Peripheral Embodiment*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

NHS England (2017) *Care and treatment Review - Di Lofthouse*.  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzWB-O\\_ZkDw](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lzWB-O_ZkDw) Published online 2017 -  
retrieved May 2021

NHS England (2017) *Getting the basics right with CTR's*.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LKFRHSsFQYw> - Published online 2017 -  
retrieved may 2021

Office For National Statistics (2023). *Labour Market Overview, UK: September 2023*. (Published online September 2023)  
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/bulletins/uklabourmarket/september2023#:~:text=The%20economic%20inactivity%20rate%20increased,increased%20to%20another%20record%20high.>

Orwell, G. (2000). *Animal Farm*. London:Penguin

Patrick, R. & Fenney, D. (2015). Disabled people, conditionality and a civic minimum in Britain: reflections from qualitative research. In C.Grover & L.Piggott ed. *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is Employment Really The Answer?* Bristol:Policy Press

Peruzzo, F. (2020). *The Model of Becoming Aware: disabled subjectivities, policy enactment and new exclusions in higher education*. *Journal of Education Policy*, Published online 8/12/2020. Available at  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2020.1856415>

Potter, J. (1996): *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction*. London: Sage

Pratt, M.L. (1991). Arts of the Contact Zone. *Profession* p33-40

Pratt, M.L. (1996). Apocalypse in the Andes: Contact Zones and the Struggle for Intrepretive Power. *Encuentros* 15 p1-16

Pratt, M.L. (2007) *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (2nd Ed.) London: Routledge

Powell, A. (2020): *The Commons Library Briefing Paper No. 7540: Disabled People in Employment*. Published online 13/8/2020. Available at <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-7540/> Retrieved February 2021

Rancière, J. (2015). *Hatred of Democracy*. London: Verso

Rapport, N. (1987). *Talking Violence: An Anthropological Interpretation of Conversation in the City*. St John's: I.S.E.R. Press

Rapport, N. (2015). *Extraordinary Encounters: Authenticity and the Interview*. Oxford: Berghahn

Ribenfors, F. (2020) Jo Campling Essay Prize, Postgraduate Winner 2019. Whose Knowledge Counts? Rewriting the Literature Review to Include Marginalised Voices. *Ethics and Social Welfare* 14(2) p230-237

Richardson, C. & Bensted, S. (2017). SMOKESCREEN: A Spartacus Network report in response to Improving Lives: Health, Work and Disability Green Paper. Published online 15/2/2017. Available at <https://spartacusnetwork.wordpress.com/2017/02/15/smokescreen-response-to-green-paper/> - retrieved February 2021

Richardson, C. & Duffy, S. (2020). *An Introduction to Basic Income Plus*. Published online 21/7/20. Available at <https://www.centreforwelfare-reform.org/uploads/attachment/739/an-introduction-to-basic-income-plus.pdf> Retrieved April 2021

Riessman, C.K. (1993): *Narrative Analysis*. Newbury Park, California: Sage

Riessman, C.K. (2008): *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

Rogers, C.R. (2004): *On Becoming a Person*. London: Constable and Robinson

Roulstone, A., Harrington, B. & Kwang Hwang, S. (2014). Flexible and Personalised? An evaluation of a UK tailored employment support programme for jobseekers with enduring mental health problems and learning difficulties. *Scandinavian Journal of Disability Research*. 16(1) p14-28

Runswick-Cole, K. & Goodley, D. (2015). Disability, Austerity and Cruel Optimism in Big Society: Resistance and "The Disability Commons". *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies* 4(2)

Rustad, M. & Kassah, A.K. (2020): Learning disability and work inclusion: on the experiences, aspirations and empowerment of sheltered employment workers in Norway. *Disability and Society* 36(2): 1-21

Ryan, F. (2019) *Crippled: Austerity and the Demonization of Disabled People*. London: Verso

Scheurich, J.J. (1997). *Research Method in the Postmodern*. London: Falmer

Sermijn, J., Devlieger, P., Loots, G. (2008). The Narrative Construction of the Self. *Qualitative Inquiry* 14 (4): 632-650

Shildrick, M. (2012). Critical Disability Studies: Rethinking the conventions for the age of postmodernity. In N. Watson, A.Roulstone & C.Thomas (ed) *Routledge Handbook of Disability Studies*. London: Routledge p30-41

Shakespeare, W. (2008). *Hamlet*. Stratford: Red Globe Press

Singer, J. (2017). *Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea*.  
<https://www.scribd.com/document/643099260/Judy-Singer-Neurodiversity-The-Birth-of-an-Idea> Retrieved Jan 2024

Silverman, D. (2005): *Doing Qualitative Research*. London: Sage

Silverman, D. (2006). *Interpreting Qualitative Data, 3rd Edition*. London: Sage

Slater, J. (2017) *Youth and Disability: A Challenge to Mr Reasonable*. Oxford: Ashgate

Smith, K., Staples, J. & Rapport, N. (2015). *Extraordinary Encounters: Authenticity and the Interview*. Oxford: Berghan

Spinoza, B. (2007) *Theological-Political Treatise*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Srnicek, N. & Williams, A. (2016). *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World Without Work*. London:Verso

Stafford, B. (2015). Why are the policies and organisations seeking to help disabled people access work failing? In C. Grover & L. Piggott ed. *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is employment really the answer?* Bristol: Policy Press

Standing, G. (2011). *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class*. London: Bloomsbury

Standing, G. (2017). *Basic Income: And How We Can Make It Happen*. London: Pelican Books

Stefánsdóttir, G. V. & Traustadóttir, R. (2015). Life histories as counter narratives against dominant and negative stereotypes about people with intellectual disabilities. *Disability and Society* 30(3) p368-380

Stenning, A. & Rosqvist A.M. (2021). Neurodiversity: mapping out possibilities of a new critical paradigm. *Disability and Society*. 36(9) pp 1532-1537

Stewart, M. (2018). *Preventable Harm and the Work Capability Assessment*. Published online August 2018  
<https://www.centreforwelfarereform.org/uploads/attachment/618/preventable-harm-and-the-work-capability-assessment.pdf> Retrieved June 2021

Stiker, H.J. (1999): *A History of Disability*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Stivers, C. (1993): Reflections on the Role of Personal Narrative in Social Science. *Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 18(2): p408-425

Taylor, J. (2021). We cannot accept a system which allows disabled people to live trapped in poverty. *Scope*. Published online 24/2/2021. Available at <https://www.scope.org.uk/news-and-stories/we-cannot-accept-a-system-which-allows-disabled-people-to-live-trapped-in-poverty/>



Thomas, D. (1995). *Under Milk Wood*. London: Everyman

Titchkosky, T. (2020). The Bureaucratic Making of Disability. *New Formations* 101 pp198-208

Tomlinson, S (2017). *A Sociology of Special Education*. Abingdon: Routledge

Tremain, S. (2015). *Foucault and the Government of Disability (2nd ed.)* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press

Trias i Valls, A. (2015): 'Different Times' and other 'Altmodern' possibilities: *Filming interviews with children as ethnographic 'wanderings'*. In K.Smith, J.Staples and N. Rapport (ed.) *Extraordinary encounters: Authenticity and the interview*. Berghahn Books: New York

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2007). *Convention on the rights of Persons with disabilities. Article 27 - Work and Employment*, Published online 2007. Available at [www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf](http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/convention/convoptprot-e.pdf)\_ Retrieved April 2021.

Valentine, G. & Harris, C. (2014). Strivers vs skivers. Class prejudice and the demonisation of dependency in everyday life. *Geoforum*. 53 p84-92

Van Maanen, J. (2011): *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Veblen, T. (2009). *The Theory of the Leisure Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Wacquant, L. (2009) *Punishing the Poor: The neoliberal government of Social Insecurity*. Durham: Duke University Press

Warren, J., Garthwaite, K. & Bamba, C. (2015). *How can integrated services help sick and disabled people remain in employment? Findings from an evaluation of an in-work support system in the North of England*. In C.Grover & L.Piggott ed. *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is employment really the answer?* Bristol: Policy Press

Wang, C. & Burris, M. (1997): Photovoice: Concept, Methodology and Use for Participatory Needs Assessment. *Health Education & Behaviour*. 24(3) pp369-387  
Weber, M. (2002). *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. London: Penguin

Weeks, K. (2011). *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics and Postwork Imaginaries*. Durham, Duke University Press

Wilton, R. & Evans, J. (2014). 'A different way of seeing productivity' : A report on the role of social enterprises in creating employment for people living with mental illness. Hamilton, Ontario, Canada: McMaster University

Woodin, S. (2015). Supply and demand side policies and the employment of learning disabled people in Britain. In C. Grover & L. Piggott ed., *Disabled People, Work and Welfare: Is employment really the answer?* pp181-198 Bristol: Polity Press

Žižek, S. (2008). *Violence: six sideways reflections*. London: Profile Books

## **Appendix 1: Research Documents**

Please note that the following documents all contain the original name of the thesis: *The next step? Investigating work programs for young adults with learning disabilities*. I have chosen not to amend them so that the reader may see the forms as they were seen by the prospective informants during recruitment to the study.

## Initial letter to theatre



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.



I am writing in the hope of finding a partner to collaborate with on a piece of doctoral research I intend to conduct sometime between September 2021-June 2022.

My name is Jim Cooper and I am a PhD student at the University of Sheffield. My research is being funded via a scholarship awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council. I am returning to education having spent almost a decade working as a Teaching Assistant at a SEND specialist school in North Manchester.

Throughout this time I was heavily involved in supporting Key Stage 4 and 5 as they completed work experience at a variety of sites across the city. Although I was inspired by the enthusiasm of the students to participate in these programmes, and the positive impact that they often had upon their places of work, I became increasingly aware of the limited job opportunities available to young adults with learning disabilities. Combined with the increasing pressure and scrutiny this group faces from the welfare system to maintain/claim benefits, I began to feel a sense of injustice that led me back to academia.

My aim is to document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities who are engaged in a work programme. I want to capture their voices, thoughts and feelings as they participate in a placement and begin to imagine a future after school. I hope to produce a piece of work that will inform future policy debate and ensure that the hopes and desires of this fantastic group of people are heard and not overlooked.

In order to do this I am looking for a partner institution that would be willing for me to observe and interview students engaged on a training course. I would also like to speak to anyone who is involved with designing, delivering and supporting the programme (teaching/support staff, employers, parents and guardians). I want to build a picture of the challenges faced by everyone as they try to prepare students for a life after education.

I will not take up any more of your time, but if you think that my research may be a good fit for your project, or if you have any further questions about the aims or methods of my research, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Yours

Jim Cooper

## Pictorial Information Sheet



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.



March 2022

The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.

## Pictorial Information Sheet

### 1. Invitation:



Hello my name is Jim.



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.

I am a student at the University of Sheffield.



I am trying to learn more about your work at [name of theatre] and how you feel about it.



To do this I want to collect information.  
This is called research.



I would like you to be part of it.



Before saying yes, you should talk to someone you trust about taking part.

## 2. Why have I been asked?



You have been asked because I want to learn about young people who are doing training.


You train at [name of theatre].

I want to learn about why your training is important to you.


## 3. Do I have to take part?



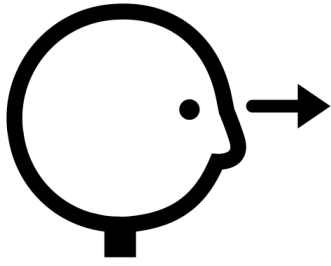
You do not have to take part.  
If you say 'No' then that is OK.  
It is your choice.

<p>[Signage of theatre company removed]</p>	<p>If you say 'Yes' then I will come to meet you at [name of theatre].</p>
	<p>If you change your mind and don't want to take part at any time, that is OK too.</p> <p>You don't have to tell me why.</p>

#### 4. What will happen if I take part?

	<p>I will visit you at [name of theatre].</p>
---	---

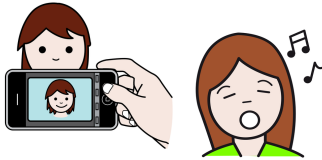




I will watch you doing your work.



I will write some things down about what I can see you doing or hear you saying.



I will ask you to tell me about your work at [name of theatre]

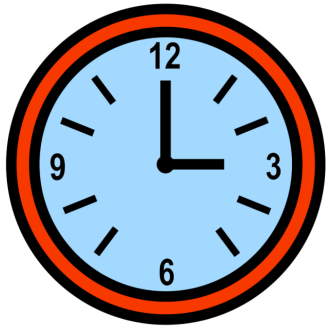
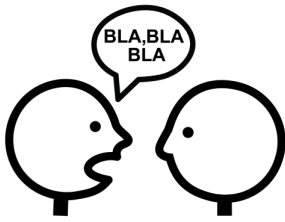
I will ask you to choose some of your work that I can film. This could be a piece of acting, dance or music. You can ask me to film more than one thing!

You can also choose to talk about pieces of finished work that your tutors have already filmed during sessions.

You can choose to be filmed alone, or you might want to be filmed as part of a group.

If you want to be filmed as part of a group or use a film that shows you working with other students:

1. The other people in the group must have agreed to take part in the research.
2. The other people in the group must agree that they want the piece you have chosen to be filmed.



Later, when you are ready, I will talk to you again.

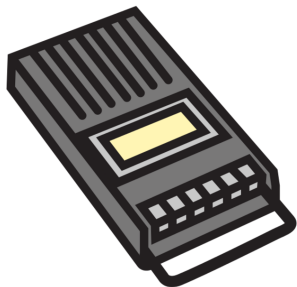
I would like to talk to you 3 times.

Each time will last around 15 minutes.

I will ask you some questions about your creative work.


I would like to know what you think about it.

I would like to know how you think other people would react to your work.




I will use a recorder so that I can remember what you tell me.


### 5. What are the possible benefits of taking part?

	<p>Taking part may help people understand what you think about work.</p>
---	--

### 6. What if there is a problem?

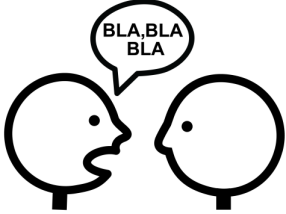
	<p>You can talk to me. You can talk to your teacher or TA. You can talk to someone you trust. You can tell me you don't want to take part anymore.</p>
--	--

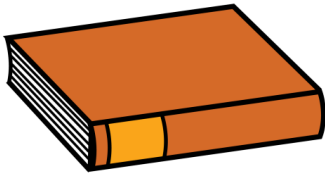
### 7. Will my taking part be kept private?

	<p>I will not use your real name in my work.</p> <p>I will take care of what you tell me.</p> <p>I will lock the information away to keep it safe.</p> <p>What you tell me will not be shared, unless you tell me about something that has hurt or upset you. Then I have to share it with your teachers.</p>
---	---

--	--

8. What will happen to the results?

	<p>I will talk to my teachers, Katherine and Dan.</p> <p>I will share what I have learnt.</p>
---	---



I have to write about what I have learnt.

I think it is important that more people know what you think about work.

To do this I will try to get my work into books and magazines. This is called 'getting published'.

### 9. Who has checked this study?

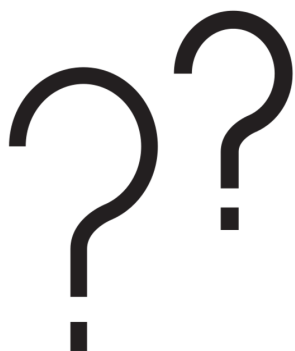


My teachers at the university, Katherine and Dan, have checked my work.

A group of people at the university called the ethics committee have checked my work.

They have all told me it is right.

10. Are you allowed to use my personal data?



Yes.

According to data protection law, I have a duty to tell you that the legal basis I am using to work with your personal data is that using it is 'necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.'

Thank you for reading this!

## Student Information Sheet



March 2022

The next step? Investigating training programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.

Hello!

My name is Jim and I am studying at the University of Sheffield. For my course I have to do a project, and I am looking for people to help me with it.

Before you say yes, please make sure you understand:

1. Why I am doing this research.
2. What I am asking you to do to help me.

We will go over this sheet together. You can ask as many questions as you like. I will also write to your parents and they can also ask me any questions they like.

### Why am I doing this research?

1. I have found out that it can be hard for people with learning disabilities to find a job after leaving school. This has made me interested in places like [name of theatre] that are trying to help school leavers get ready for work.

2. I also found out that people with learning disabilities are not often asked about what they think about work.

I would like to give you a chance to tell me what you think



about the training you have done so far. I want to understand if it is helping you to develop skills that will be important later in life.

### Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you if you wish to take part. Before you choose, you can ask as many questions as you want. If you decide to take part, you need to fill in and sign the consent form. The research is due to start in November 2022 so you have plenty of time to think about it. If you do decide to take part, you can stop at any time, for any reason and don't have to say why.

### What will I ask you to do?

If you agree to take part in my study, I will ask you questions about your time at [name of student].

I would like to start by asking you to choose pieces of your artistic work for me to film. For example, you could ask me to film your monologue, a piece of your choreography or one of your musical performances. Or you could ask me to film them all!

I am also happy to film a piece of your collaborative work with other students, but I can only do this if:

- a) The other students in the piece you would like me to film have agreed to take part in my research.

b) The other students are happy for me to film the piece you have chosen.

I also know that your tutors have filmed pieces of your creative work as part of your assessments. You are also free to choose one of these films to talk about as I have been given permission by staff at [name of theatre] to use them in my research.

The films I record will be treated as data for me to begin to think about your experience at [name of theatre], and also to help us start talking about your training during the interviews. The films will not appear in my final work, which is called a thesis. However, I will create written descriptions of your creative work from the films and use these to help people reading my work to understand your experience at [name of theatre].

Once I have filmed what you have told me to, I would like to talk with you about your creative work in a series of three short interviews (approx 15-20 min each). These will be audio recorded.

During the first interview, we will start by looking at the filmed footage and talking about it. I would like to know what it means to you and why you asked me to film it. I would also like to talk to you about the effect you think your work may

have on other people outside [name of theatre].

Examples of questions I might ask you during the first interview are:

Why did you ask me to film this particular piece?

Why is it important to you?

Is your training changing your thoughts about what work you would like to do in the future?

In the other two interviews I will be checking with you that I have understood what you have told me about both your creative work and your experience at [name of theatre]. I want to make sure that I have got it right and represented your views and thoughts as accurately as possible.

### How will you keep information about me safe?

It is my duty to make sure that in order to protect you I follow the rules set out in the Data Protection Act.

All the information I gather will be securely stored and I will control who can and cannot look at it.

After each interview, I will go away and listen back to the recording. I will use the recording to create a script that helps me to understand what you have told me. When I make

this script I will remove any personal information, so that no-one can recognise you. This is called anonymising.

### Who will see this work?

While I am collecting information and thinking about what you have told me, the only people other than me who will see your ideas and work are my teachers, Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole and Professor Dan Goodley. They will help me to check my work, and make sure that I am doing the research properly. When I have finished my work I would like to share it with other people who are interested in working with and helping young adults with learning disabilities. This is called getting my work 'published'. In the consent form with this information pack you have the chance to say if you are happy for me to use your words, pictures and ideas in this way.

### Who has told you that it is O.K. to do this project?

A group of people at the university called the Ethics Committee met and talked about my work. They decided that it was being done for the right reasons and that you would be safe to take part.

Also my teachers (Professor Runswick-Cole and Professor Goodley) have lots of experience of working with people with learning disabilities. They check my work once a month to make sure that the project is set up properly.

Are you allowed to work with my personal data?

Yes. According to data protection law, I have a duty to tell you that the legal basis I am using to work with your personal data is that using it is 'necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.'

Thank you for reading this!

Jim Cooper

## Parent/Guardian Information Sheet



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.



March 2022

### **The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.**

#### **Parent/Guardian Information Sheet**

Your child is being invited to take part in a PhD study being funded through a scholarship awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to James Cooper, a student at The University of Sheffield. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to contact the researcher (James Cooper [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk)) if there is anything that is not clear to you about the research, or if you would like more information about the aims of the research.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

James Cooper - [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Broomhall, Sheffield, S10 2GW

#### **About the researcher**

I spent the past decade working as a Teaching Assistant in a SEND specialist school in North Manchester. I worked in key stages 4 & 5 where I was heavily involved in supporting pupils as they participated in work experience placements across the city. My time spent doing this made me acutely aware of the challenges young adults with learning disabilities face when trying to access the workplace. Indeed, it was this injustice that drove me to return to university as a mature student.

I hope in some small way that my research can inform future policy debate to ensure that young adults with learning disabilities are treated by the labour market with the equity, dignity and respect that they have traditionally been denied, but undoubtedly deserve.

#### **What is the purpose of the research?**

My research has two aims. Firstly to document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term work placement. My second aim is to explore and critique the suitability of work experience programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.

My research so far has led me to believe that the voices of young adults with learning disabilities describing their experiences on long term work placements are under-represented. I believe that it is vital to gather and present their views on work experience programmes to a wider audience for two reasons. Firstly to raise awareness of their experiences whilst engaged in work preparation programmes and secondly to ensure that we continue to strive to provide young adults with learning disabilities with support and services of the very highest quality.

#### **Why has my child been chosen?**

Your child has been identified as a potential participant because of their involvement at [name of theatre].

### **What would my child be asked to do if they take part?**

At the start of my project I would like to spend 2-3 days a week at [name of theatre], watching what happens during a typical day there and taking notes. It is hoped that these sessions will allow your child to get used to my being at [name of theatre] and also begin to build a working relationship with them.

Following this, I would like to begin to document their experience at [name of theatre]. At the start this will mean inviting students to choose pieces of their artistic output (e.g. dramatic monologues, musical or dance performances) for me to film and record. The students will also have the choice to direct me to earlier pieces of completed work that have been filmed by the tutors at [name of theatre] as part of their ongoing assessment. The student will be free to instruct me to film more than one creative piece if they wish. Additionally, groups of students who have signed up to the research will be free to direct me to record a collaborative piece, such as a piece of group choreography etc. Such recordings will only take place if all members of a prospective group have consented to take part in the research and are happy for the chosen piece to be recorded. Likewise, ensemble pieces filmed by the tutors will only be used if the same criteria listed above are met. These recordings will inform the next part of the research which will be a series of short, unstructured interviews.

I would like to conduct 2-3 short audio recorded interviews with each student. I would expect each interview to last around 20 minutes. I would like the interviews to take place over the course of a 6 week period. This will allow me to think about what a student has told me in the previous interview. The interviews will take place in a public space at [name of theatre] and I will ensure that your child's regular support team is nearby at all times. Your child will be given the choice of speaking to me on a one to one basis in a public space at [name of theatre], but I am also more than happy for them to be supported during the interviews by either a parent/guardian or support staff from [name of theatre] if they feel more comfortable conducting the interview this way. I am also happy to conduct group interviews with students who have signed up to take part in the research and who have chosen to be filmed together performing their creative work.

In the first interview I will rewatch the creative performance(s) with the student and begin to discuss with them what they believe it illustrates about their experience at [name of theatre]. I will use the recordings to investigate both the effect that being immersed in a creative environment has on the students, as well as their understanding of how audiences may react to their work. I want to document whether being involved in the Academy at [name of theatre] is affecting how the students understand and plan their futures. Is the training altering their future aspirations, or informing future employment choices? Moreover, do they view what they are creating as radical, challenging common (mis)conceptions of what people with learning disabilities can achieve, or is this of little importance to the individual?

I will use the two follow up interviews to help to clarify what the student has told me, and to ensure that I have documented their experience and represented their views as accurately as possible.

Examples of questions I would like to ask are: Why did you ask me to film this particular piece? Why is it important to you? How does it help to explain your experience at [name of theatre]?

### **What happens to the data collected?**

The interviews will be transcribed to create data that can be used to form the basis of the project. All physical data (e.g. transcripts of interviews) will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher. Electronic data (film recordings, audio recordings, photographs etc.) will be stored on the University of Sheffield's secure server for the duration of the project. All data will be deleted one year after the end of the project (October 2024).

One of the conditions of the ESRC funding is that transcripts of the interviews will be added to the *Reshare* database. Any personal information that could be used to identify individuals will be removed before doing so (see *will the data be shared section?* below).

Storage of film/audio recordings will be managed by the researcher, Jim Cooper. The interviews will be transcribed and pseudonymised by the researcher. The audio recordings and visual data gathered during the research will be used only for analysis. No other use of them will be made without your permission, and no one other than the researcher and the research supervisors will be allowed access to the original recordings.

The data will be gathered into the final draft of the PhD which will be submitted to the University of Sheffield for examination in October 2023.

### **Will the data be published?**

It is the researchers intention to attempt either to get the work published in whole, or parts of the work published in peer-reviewed and practitioner journals. You are given the chance to give your consent to your child's words and creative data being used in this manner in the attached consent form.

### **Will the data be shared?**

Yes. As mentioned above, this research is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) by a scholarship awarded to the researcher Jim Cooper. The ESRC asks that any data gathered by the researcher is added to *Reshare*, the national database of the UK Data Service. This is because, due to the nature of the research, it is possible that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. However, neither the films themselves or the audio recordings will be shared. Instead written descriptions of the films, along with transcripts of the interviews will be shared. Both video and audio recordings will be deleted by the researcher at the end of the project (November 2023)

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

All the information collected during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be available to the researcher (Jim Cooper) and the research supervisors (Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole and Professor Dan Goodley). Personal details will be anonymised so that your child will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

### **What is the legal basis for collecting personal data?**

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that **'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.'** (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information



can be found in the University of Sheffield's privacy notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

### **Who is the data controller for this research?**

The University of Sheffield will act as data controller on this research. The University is responsible for looking after your child's information and using it properly.

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education.

### **What happens if I do not want my child to take part or if I change my mind?**

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. If you wish to remove your child from the project you do not have to state a reason why. Any data collected from your child up to that point would automatically be deleted. The deadline for withdrawal is 1st January 2023. This is to allow the researcher time to complete the final thesis for submission in October 2023.

### **How soon will we have to decide?**

The research is due to start after the 2022 Easter holidays. It would be great to hear from you before this date. However, if you decide that you would like your child to take part after the start date, please feel free to contact me using the details provided at the bottom of this sheet..

### **Will my child or I be paid for participating in the research?**

No

### **What is the duration of the research?**

The data collection will start after the 2022 Easter holidays. The researcher will be on site at [name of theatre] from March 2022. The researcher will spend 2-3 days per week during term time gathering data about working practices at [name of theatre]. The researcher will conduct 3 separate interviews of approximately 20 minutes with each child. The interviews will be scheduled to take place over the course of 6 weeks.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

The interviews will be conducted onsite at [name of theatre].

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

There is the hope that the finished work will be published either in full or in parts in peer reviewed journals. Extracts, your words, from the interview transcripts and my research notes will be included but your name will not be attached to them.

### **Who has reviewed the research project?**

This project has been reviewed and authorised by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

## **What if something goes wrong during the interview?**

In the event of your child becoming distressed, the interview would immediately be terminated, and assistance sought from the support staff. If a sensitive disclosure was made, the researcher would adhere to the school's safeguarding policy. (See attached Disclosure/Distress form)

## **What if I want to make a complaint?**

### **Issues and Concerns**

Feel free to contact me at any time during the project if you have any questions about the research. My contact details are:

James Cooper - [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0161 860 0653

### **Complaints**

If you wish to make a complaint about either the researcher or the research, please contact the Research Supervisors. Their contact details are:

Professor Dan Goodley - [d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8185

Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole - [k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8101

School of Education

Edgar Allen House

241 Glossop Road

Sheffield S10 2GW

### **Formal Complaints**

If you wish to make a formal complaint or if you are not satisfied with the response you have gained from the Researcher Supervisors please contact the Head of the School of Education:

Professor Rebecca Lawthom

School of Education

Edgar Allen House

241 Glossop Rd

Sheffield S10 2GW

## **What Do I Do Now?**

Please complete the consent form included in this information pack and return it to the school secretary. If you have any queries about the study or if you are interested in taking part yourself then please contact the researcher.

This Project Has Been Approved by the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee  
[Project Ref. 037418].



## Stakeholder Information Sheet

March 2022

### **The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.**

#### **Stakeholder Information Sheet**

(tutors/support staff/[name of theatre] management team/[name of theatre] Trustees)

You are being invited to take part in a PhD study being funded through a scholarship awarded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to James Cooper, a student at The University of Sheffield. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Feel free to contact the researcher (James Cooper [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk)) if there is anything that is not clear to you about the research, or if you would like more information about the aims of the research.

#### **Who will conduct the research?**

James Cooper - [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Broomhall, Sheffield, S10 2GW

#### **About the researcher**

I spent the past decade working as a Teaching Assistant in a SEND specialist school in North Manchester. I worked in key stages 4 & 5 where I was heavily involved in supporting pupils as they participated in work experience placements across the city. My time spent doing this made me acutely aware that, in comparison to their peers, young adults with learning disabilities face huge challenges when trying to access the workplace. Indeed, it was this disparity that drove me to return to university as a mature student.

I hope in some small way that my research can inform future policy debate to ensure that young adults with learning disabilities are treated by the labour market with the equity, dignity and respect that they have traditionally been denied, but undoubtedly deserve.

#### **What is the purpose of the research?**

My research has two aims. Firstly to capture the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities as they engage with a long term work placement. My second aim is to document a long term training programme for young adults with learning disabilities.

My research so far has led me to believe that the voices of young adults with learning disabilities are under-represented. I believe that it is vital to gather and present their views on work experience programmes to a wider audience for two reasons. Firstly to raise awareness of their experiences whilst engaged on work preparation programmes, and secondly to ensure that we continue to strive to provide young adults with learning disabilities with support and services of the very highest quality.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen either because of your personal or professional involvement in supporting young adults with learning disabilities. In particular, I am keen to hear your views about the vocational opportunities available to post 16 students and the challenges they face as they begin to transition towards adult life.

### **What would I be asked to do if I take part? (Tutors and Support Staff)**

The primary method of data collection for this research will be capturing the students as they rehearse and perform their creative work in the drama, music and movement classes. I will invite the students to choose pieces of their creative work that I can film. This will help me achieve the first aim of my research: to document the experience of a young adult with learning disabilities engaged on a long term training project.

I hope to negotiate suitable time for the recording of the student's creative pieces with tutors and support staff at[name of theatre]. I will be guided by tutors and staff as to when is the appropriate time to film the creative work and complete the interviews with the students. My personal view is that my research is of secondary importance when compared to the ongoing training that the students are undertaking. Any attempt on my behalf to gather data must not interfere in any way with the learning experience of the students. It is from this starting premise that negotiation with the teaching staff regarding data collection will begin.

Whilst the primary aim of the research is to capture the experience of the students engaging with educational training programmes at[name of theatre], a secondary aim is to document a long term training programme for young adults with learning disabilities. As part of this, I am interested in the possibility of filming interactions between students and staff that occur during the course of the training. I would like, with the consent of teaching staff, to film the collaboration between students and staff as creative work is rehearsed, shaped, critiqued and developed. All film recordings of students and staff alike will be treated as raw data, and will not appear in the final thesis.

My initial observations at [name of theatre] have led me to believe that something really rather special is occurring within the studios - something that I believe deserves to be shared with a wider audience in order to challenge orthodox thinking about the capabilities of young adults with learning disabilities, and also to inform debates about the future possibilities and potentialities of this group of people.

### **What will I be asked to do if I take part? (All)**

All key stakeholders (staff, parents etc.) will be invited to take part in an interview (lasting approx 45 mins). The overarching theme will be how young adults with learning disabilities are being prepared for the workplace. I would like to hear the thoughts of key stakeholders about approaches that they believe are making a real difference to the lives of young adults

with learning disabilities, and also to gather views on areas where people feel there is still room for development.

Following the first interview, I might ask to speak to you briefly either by phone or email. This second interaction will be used to check that I have understood what you have told me, and to ensure that you feel that I have represented your opinions fairly.

Examples of questions I will ask are: What is your involvement in preparing young adults with learning disabilities for life after school/work? What approaches/ideas do you believe are successful in preparing this group for life after school? How do you think that services could be improved to support the transition of young adults with learning disabilities from school into society at large?

### **What happens to the data collected?**

The interviews will be transcribed to create data that can be used to form the basis of the project. Electronic data (audio recordings of the interview) will be stored on the University of Sheffield's secure server (X:Drive) for the duration of the project. These films will be used to create descriptions of the space and activities occurring at Mind The Gap. This data will be deleted one year after the end of the project (October 2024).

One of the conditions of the ESRC funding is that transcripts of the interviews will be added to the *Reshare* database. Any personal information that could be used to identify individuals will be removed before doing so (see *will the data be shared section?* below).

Storage of video and audio recordings will be managed by the researcher, Jim Cooper. The video recordings will be treated as raw data and will not be used in the final thesis. Interviews will be transcribed and pseudonymised by the researcher. The video and audio recordings made during the research will be used only for analysis. No other use of them will be made without your permission, and no one other than the researcher and the research supervisors will be allowed access to the original recordings.

The data will be gathered into the final draft of the PhD which will be submitted to the University of Sheffield for examination in October 2023.

### **Will the data be published?**

It is the researchers intention to attempt either to get the work published in whole, or parts of the work published in peer-reviewed and practitioner journals. You are given the chance to give your consent to your words being used in this manner in the attached consent form.

### **Will the data be shared?**

Yes. As mentioned above, this research is being funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) by a scholarship awarded to the researcher Jim Cooper. The ESRC asks that any data gathered by the researcher is added to *Reshare*, the national database of the UK Data Service. This is because, due to the nature of the research, it is possible that other researchers may find the data collected to be useful in answering future research questions. Before sharing, however, any identifiable information will be redacted to preserve anonymity.

### **How is confidentiality maintained?**

All the information collected during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential and will only be available to the researcher (Jim Cooper) and the research supervisors (Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole and Professor Dan Goodley). Personal details will be anonymised so that you will not be able to be identified in any reports or publications.

### **What is the legal basis for collecting personal data?**

According to data protection legislation, we are required to inform you that the legal basis we are applying in order to process your personal data is that *'processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.'* (Article 6(1)(e)). Further information can be found in the University of Sheffield's privacy notice <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/govern/data-protection/privacy/general>

### **Who is the data controller for this research?**

The University of Sheffield will act as data controller on this research. The University is responsible for looking after your child's information and using it properly.

### **Who has ethically reviewed the project?**

This project has been ethically approved via the University of Sheffield's Ethics Review Procedure, as administered by the School of Education.

### **What happens if I do not want to take part or if I change my mind?**

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary. You can decide to withdraw at any point before the deadline and you do not have to state a reason why. Any data collected from you up to that point would automatically be deleted. The deadline for withdrawal is 1st January 2023. This is to allow the researcher time to complete the final thesis for hand in October 2023.

### **How soon will we have to decide?**

The research is due to start on (provide date). It would be great to hear from you before this date. However, if you decide that you would like to take part after the start date (date provided), please feel free to contact me using the details provided at the bottom of this sheet..

### **Will I be paid for participating in the research?**

No

### **What is the duration of the research?**

The data collection will start on (date to be negotiated [name of theatre]). The researcher will be on site at the work placement for (time to be negotiated with partner institution). The researcher will spend 2-3 days per week gathering data about a typical day at [name of theatre]. The researcher will conduct 3 separate interviews of approximately 20 minutes with each child. The interviews will be scheduled to take place over the course of 6 weeks.

### **Where will the research be conducted?**

The interviews will be conducted during the day at a place that is convenient to you. The researcher is also happy to conduct interviews via platforms such as Zoom etc.

### **Will the outcomes of the research be published?**

There is the hope that the finished work will be published either in full or in parts in peer reviewed journals. Extracts, your words, from the interview transcripts and my research notes will be included but your name will not be attached to them.

### **Who has reviewed the research project?**

This project has been reviewed and authorised by the University of Sheffield Research Ethics Committee.

### **What if something goes wrong during the interview?**

In the event of you becoming distressed, the interview would immediately be terminated.

### **What if I want to make a complaint?**

#### **Issues and Concerns**

Feel free to contact me at any time during the project if you have any questions about the research. My contact details are:

James Cooper - [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0161 860 0653

#### **Complaints**

If you wish to make a complaint about either the researcher or the research, please contact the Research Supervisors. Their contact details are:

Professor Dan Goodley - [d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8185

Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole - [k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8101

School of Education

Edgar Allen House

241 Glossop Road

Sheffield S10 2GW

#### **Formal Complaints**

If you wish to make a formal complaint or if you are not satisfied with the response you have gained from the Researcher Supervisors please contact the Head of the School of Education:

Professor Rebecca Lawthom

School of Education

Edgar Allen House

241 Glossop Rd

Sheffield S10 2GW

### **What Do I Do Now?**

Please complete the consent form included in this information pack and return it to the school secretary. If you have any queries about the study or if you are interested in taking part yourself then please contact the researcher.

This Project Has Been Approved by the University of Sheffield's Research Ethics Committee  
[Ref no 037418].



## Support Staff Information Sheet

March 2022

Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.

Hello!

My name is Jim and I am studying at the University of Sheffield. I am asking for your help because ..... has asked for your support during the interview today.

Before you say yes, please make sure you understand:

1. Why I am doing this research.
2. What I am asking you to do to help me.

We will go over this sheet together. You can ask as many questions as you like about my research or the interview.

### Why am I doing this research?

1. I have found out that it can be hard for people with learning disabilities to find a job after leaving school. This has made me interested in places like [name of theatre] that are trying to help young people with learning disabilities get ready for work.
2. I also found out that people with learning disabilities are not often asked about what they think about work. I believe it is vital that their voices are heard. They need to be given the opportunity to reflect upon the projects that have been designed for them. By listening to them we can hopefully ensure that programmes for young adults with learning disabilities are tailored to meet their needs.



### Do I have to take part?

No, it is up to you if you wish to take part. Before you decide, you can ask as many questions as you want. If you do wish to take part, you need to fill in and sign the consent form before the interview starts.

### What will I ask you to do?

Your role today will be to provide support for ..... during the interview. I will be asking you to be a communication partner for ..... in order to assist them in telling me about their experiences at [name of theatre]. You should be aware that I will be recording the interview today. This means that by choosing to take part in the interview, any answers you give either on behalf of ....., or any opinions you may hold about the project could be used as data in the final report.

### What happens if I change my mind about taking part?

If, after today, you decide that you no longer want to take part I will delete any recorded data/transcripts that involve your answers. You are free to change your mind at any point up to 1st January 2023. I have chosen this date as by this point I will be into the analysis of the data I have gathered.

### How will you keep information about me safe?

It is my duty to make sure that in order to protect you I follow the rules set out in the Data Protection Act.

All the information I gather will be securely stored and I will control who can and cannot look at it.

After the interview, I will go away and transcribe the recording. As part of this process I will remove any personal information that could be used to identify you.

### Who is the data controller for this research?

The University of Sheffield will act as data controller on this research. The University is responsible for looking after your child's information and using it properly.

### Who will see this work?

The interview will be transcribed and shared with my supervisors, Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole and Professor Dan Goodley.

At some point I would also hope to get my work published in peer reviewed journals because I would like my work to be part of the ongoing conversation to ensure that young adults with learning disabilities receive the support and opportunities for development that they deserve.

At the end of the project, transcriptions of the interview will be given to the UK Data Service. They will store it in their database, *Reshare*, because there is a chance that future researchers may be interested in these interviews.

### Who has authorised this research?

This project has been scrutinised and authorised to proceed by the University of Sheffield's Ethics Committee.

### Are you allowed to work with my personal data?

Yes. According to data protection law, I have a duty to tell you that the legal basis I am using to work with your personal data is that using it is 'necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest.'

### What if I want to make a complaint?

#### Issues and Concerns

Feel free to contact me at any time during the project if you have any questions about the research. My contact details are:

James Cooper - [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0161 860 0653

### Complaints

If you wish to make a complaint about either the researcher or the research, please contact the Research Supervisors. Their contact details are:

Professor Dan Goodley - [d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8185

Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole - [k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.runswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8101

School of Education, Edgar Allen House, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield S10 2GW

### Formal Complaints

If you wish to make a formal complaint or if you are not satisfied with the response you have gained from the Researcher Supervisors please contact the Head of the School of Education:

Professor Rebecca Lawthom

School of Education

Edgar Allen House

241 Glossop Rd

Sheffield S10 2GW

Thank you for reading this!

Jim Cooper



The University Of Sheffield.



## Student Consent Form

March 2022

### Student Consent Form

#### The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.

Researcher: James Cooper

Please tick box

- 1) I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.
- 2) I have been able to ask questions about the study, and I am happy with the answers I have been given.
- 3) I understand that I will be filmed as part of the data collection process. I am happy for this filming to take place.
- 4) I understand that any film footage of my creative work will not be included in the final thesis. Instead the researcher will use the videos to create a written description of my creative work that will be in the final thesis.
- 5) I understand my name will not be used, only the answers I give. The researcher will make sure I cannot be recognised by my answers.
- 6) I understand that if the researcher has any concerns about my answers they have a duty to report it to a member of my teaching staff.

7) I understand that taking part is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving a reason.

8) I understand that the data collected will be used as part of a research project. I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.

9) I understand that the data gathered during the study will be stored by the UK Data Service because researchers may want to use it in the future.

10) I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of Researcher:

Signature:

Date:

When completed: 1 copy for Participant, 1 copy for Researcher file

## Parent/Guardian Consent Form



## Parent/Guardian Consent Form

**The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.**

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Yes	No
I have read and understood the project information sheet dated March 2022 or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean).		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
I agree to allow my child to take part in the project. I understand that their taking part in the project will include both of the following: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Performing pieces of creative work that will be filmed by the researcher to document their experience at [name of theatre].</li> <li>2. Taking part in a series of 3 short informal interviews (of around 20 minutes) that will be audio recorded and transcribed..</li> </ol>		
I understand that their taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw my child from the study at any time before 1/1/2023. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want my child to take part and there will be no consequences if I choose to withdraw my child.		
<b>How my information will be used during and after the project</b>		
I understand the personal details of my child will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand that the films created by the researcher as part of the data collection process will not be shared or used in the final thesis		
I understand and agree that my child's words and creative data may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that they will not be named in these outputs.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my child's interviews and in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, but only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I give permission for the interviews, and written descriptions of the creative pieces that are produced during data collection to be deposited in <i>Reshare</i> , the data repository of the UK Data service, so it can be used for future research and learning.		
<b>So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers</b>		
I agree to assign the copyright my child holds in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant [printed]

Signature

Date

Name of Researcher [printed]

Signature

Date

**Project contact details for further information:**

Researcher - Jim Cooper: [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0161 860 0653

Research Supervisors - Professor Daniel Goodley: [d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8185

- Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole: [k.ruswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.ruswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0114 222 8101

School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Broomhall, Sheffield, S10 2GW

**In the event of needing to make a complaint please contact:**

Professor Rebecca Lawthom: [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk) Head of School, School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW

Save 2 copies of the consent form: 1 paper copy for the participant, 1 copy for the research data file

## Stakeholder Consent Form



The University  
Of  
Sheffield.



## Stakeholder Consent Form - March 2022

**The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.**

<i>Please tick the appropriate boxes</i>	Y	N
I have read and understood the project information sheet or the project has been fully explained to me. (If you answer No to this question please do not proceed with this consent form until you are fully aware of what your participation in the project will mean).		
I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the project.		
<b>Tutors/Support Staff:</b> I understand that I may be filmed by the researcher during the recording of the students' creative work. I give my consent to be filmed.		
<b>Tutors/Support Staff:</b> I understand that any filmed footage will be treated as raw data, and will be used by the researcher for analysis only. Filmed footage will not appear in the final thesis. It will be stored securely for the duration of the research, then deleted upon completion of the project.		
<b>All:</b> I agree to take part in the project. I understand that taking part in the project will involve participating in an interview with the researcher. I understand that this interview will last for approximately 45 minutes.		
I understand that my taking part is voluntary and that I can withdraw from the study at any time before 1/1/2023. I do not have to give any reasons for why I no longer want to take part, and there will be no consequences if I choose to withdraw..		
<b>How my information will be used during and after the project</b>		
I understand my personal details will not be revealed to people outside the project.		
I understand and agree that my words from the interview may be quoted in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs. I understand that I will not be named in these outputs.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I understand and agree that other authorised researchers may use my interview and pictures in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, but		



only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.		
I give permission for a transcription of the interview to be deposited in <i>Reshare</i> , the data repository of the UK Data service, so it can be used for future research and learning.		
<b>So that the information you provide can be used legally by the researchers</b>		
I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.		

Name of participant [printed]                      Signature                      Date

Name of Researcher [printed]                      Signature                      Date

**Project contact details for further information:**

Researcher - Jim Cooper: [jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:jcooper14@sheffield.ac.uk) Tel: 0161 860 0653

Research Supervisors:

Professor Daniel Goodley: [d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.goodley@sheffield.ac.uk)

Tel: 0114 222 8185

Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole: [k.ruswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.ruswick-cole@sheffield.ac.uk)

Tel: 0114 222 8101

Address:

School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Broomhall, Sheffield, S10 2GW

**In the event of needing to make a complaint please contact:**

Professor Rebecca Lawthom: [r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:r.lawthom@sheffield.ac.uk) Head of School, School of Education, University of Sheffield, 241 Glossop Road, Sheffield, S10 2GW



The University Of Sheffield.



## Support Staff Consent Form

March 2022

### Support Staff Consent Form

**The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.**

Researcher: James Cooper

<u>Box</u>	<u>Please Initial</u>
1) I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet.	<input type="checkbox"/>
2) I have been able to ask questions about the study, and I am happy with the answers I have been given.	<input type="checkbox"/>
3) I understand that my role today is to act as a communication partner for ..... I will help ..... to articulate their views on their experiences at [name of theatre].	<input type="checkbox"/>
4) I understand that the interview today is being recorded and that any answers I give whilst supporting the student may be used as data in the final report.	<input type="checkbox"/>
5) I understand that the interviews will be anonymised to remove any personal data. I will not be able to be recognised in the final transcriptions.	<input type="checkbox"/>
6) I understand that taking part is completely voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before 1/6/23 without giving a reason.	<input type="checkbox"/>

- 7) I understand that the data collected will be used as part of a research project. I agree to assign the copyright I hold in any materials generated as part of this project to The University of Sheffield.
- 8) I understand that the data gathered during the study will be stored by the UK Data Service because researchers may want to use it in the future.
- 9) I agree to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant:

Signature:

Date:

Name of Researcher:

Signature:

Date:

This sheet will be given to support staff in the eventuality that a student requests for a member of their support team to be present during the interview.

When completed: 1 copy for Participant, 1 copy for Researcher file

## Distress & Disclosure Protocol



The  
University  
Of  
Sheffield.



March 2022 - Version 1

### **The next step? Investigating work programmes for young adults with learning disabilities.**

#### **Distress protocol**

##### **Observed behaviour**

- A participant indicates they are experiencing a high level of stress or emotional distress.

OR

- Exhibit behaviours suggestive that the discussion/interview is too stressful such as becoming unresponsive to questions, showing frustration during answering questions, crying, shaking etc.

##### **Action to be taken**

- Stop the discussion/interview immediately.
- Researcher to seek immediate assistance from support staff.
- The researcher will step away and let support staff manage the situation.
- Once the participant is calm, the researcher will speak with the support staff and the participant to assess whether the participant feels able to continue with the interview
- If the participant feels able to carry on; resume the interview/discussion.

##### **If participant is unable to carry on**

- Discontinue the interview, allow staff to take control of the situation.
- Follow the participant up with a courtesy call to school. Discuss with relevant staff whether there is any merit in reconvening the interview.

#### **Researcher distress**

In the case of the researcher becoming distressed (i.e. after hearing a troubling disclosure) the researcher will in the first instance seek assistance and advice from the research supervisors (Professor Katherine Runswick-Cole and Professor Dan Goodley).

## **Disclosure Protocol**

### **Observed behaviour**

- A participant makes a disclosure regarding inappropriate behaviour/abuse during the interview.

### **Action to be taken**

- Stop the discussion/interview immediately. The student will be informed that this is a safeguarding issue, and that the safeguarding lead needs to be informed.
- Researcher to seek immediate assistance from the Support Assistant to support the student.
- Researcher to report the incident to lead support staff at the project. If an allegation is made against lead support staff at the project, the researcher will report immediately to the safeguarding team at the organisation.

## Appendix 2 - Interview log

Date	Name	Job Title	Scheduled Time	Actual Duration	Location
9/11/22	Name redacted	Head of Learning and Support	10.30 - 11.15	41m 56s	Meeting Room
9/11/22	Name redacted	Head of Performance Academy	14.15 - 15.00	56m 26s	Meeting Room
14/11/22	Name redacted	Artistic Director	10.00 - 10.45	48m 43s	Meeting Room
23/11/22	Name redacted	Head of Creative Engagement	10.00 - 10.45	1h 15m 58s	Meeting Room
23/11/22	Name redacted	Learning and Participation Co-Ordinator	13.00 - 13.45	48m 14s	Meeting Room
30/11/22	Name redacted	Associate Artist: Music	10.30 - 11.15	1h 1m 6s	Zoom Call
30/11/22	Name redacted	Associate Artist-Theatre and Engagement	13.00 - 13.45	29m 57s	Meeting Room
30/11/22	Name redacted	Partner Programme Lead and Access Champion	14.15 - 15.00	44m 26s	Zoom Call
12/12/22	Name redacted	Associate Artist: Drama	12.00 - 12.45	30m 41s	Meeting Room
16/1/23	Name redacted	Executive Director	12.00 - 12.45	54m 8s	Meeting Room
28/2/23	James (1)	Student	10.30 - 10.45	14m 10s	Meeting Room
28/2/23	Bryan (1)	Student	12.00 - 12.15	15m 4s	Meeting Room
28/2/23	Tom (1)	Student	12.30 - 12.45	10m 14s	Meeting Room
28/2/23	Bob (1)	Student	13.15 - 13.30	12m 17s	Meeting Room
28/2/23	Tink (1)	Student	14.15 - 14.30	14m 50s	Meeting Room
14/3/23	James (2)	Student	10.30 - 10.45	15m 38s	Meeting Room
14/3/23	Bryan (2)	Student	11.45 - 12.00	23m 12s	Meeting Room
14/3/23	Bob (2)	Student	12.30 - 12.45	10m 59s	Meeting Room
14/3/23	Tink (2)	Student	13.45 - 14.00	15m 16s	Meeting Room
14/3/23	Tom (2)	Student	14.15 - 14.30	16m 47s	Meeting Room
21/3/23	James (3)	Student	10.30 - 10.45	13m 21s	Meeting Room
21/3/23	Bryan (3)	Student	11.45 - 12.00	20m 58s	Meeting Room
21/3/23	Tom (3)	Student	12.30 - 12.45	14m 49s	Meeting Room

21/3/23	Bob (3)	Student	14.00 - 14.15	9m 8s	Meeting Room
21/3/23	Tink (3)	Student	14.30 - 14.45	12m 14s	Meeting Room

## Appendix 3 - Field Note example

### 1. 16/11/21 Academy - Initial Impressions

Tutor [name redacted] (Leader) [names redacted] (Support worker)

Students: [name redacted]/Bob/James/Tink/Bryan/[name redacted]/Tom

#### Things available to the senses / What was significant or unexpected

The journey across to [name of town] was long and arduous. Almost 2 hours to do 48 miles. The building itself is situated on [name removed]. It's clearly an area under redevelopment. The building up the road is still a shell.

[name of theatre] is very much finished though. Accessed through double height sliding glass doors via a slick looking video intercom system. There is an inner atrium approx 2m wide that opens into a small reception area. I was met at the door by [name redacted] and asked to sign in and given a pass. Directly beyond the reception area are two flights of stairs, one up one down.

[name redacted] took me first for a whistle stop tour of the 3 studios. All feature high ceilings that reveal the past function of the space as a mill. It had the stripped back feel of so many modern professional spaces (exposed brickwork and girders, unplastered ceilings, but noticeably the original floorboards had been overlaid with modern tongue and groove floorboards which are seamless and easy to walk across. Studios 1 and 2 are the main performance spaces, featuring banks of retractable seats. Studio 2 has a balcony. All are replete with technical equipment (lights, sounddesk etc) that one would expect to find in a professional theatrical space.

Had a whistle stop tour upstairs, which are offices for staff. Through the door you find yourself presented with a kind of an "L" shape. One open plan area where the majority sit, and another where a few people sit (Q: is there some kind of interdepartmental demarcation in existence). In the middle is a large office for meetings?

Went downstairs again and by this time all the academy students were piling in. Everyone congregating in large communal space where the students have lunch/breaks etc. Full room, full of easy conversations. No-one seemed



unengaged or on their own. First up to speak to me was Tom. He was keen to tell me all about his studies (in particular his arts award and his level 4 qualification that he is doing @ [name of theatre] and will be accredited by [name of accrediting university]. He informed me that the level 4 was the equivalent of completing a first year at university. He was keen to get this across to me.

Other students followed and I made a brief acquaintance of with [names redacted]. Friendly welcome by all.

Was then asked by [name of staff] if I would meet James who, according to staff, is someone who is 'nervous about meeting new people'. Again nice short chat to introduce myself.

Then taken into Studio 3 to meet [name of tutor] who was doing a movement class.

**Students: [name redacted]/Bob/James/Tink/Bryan/[name redacted]/Tom**

Professional warm up - literally head to toe. Playlist designed to put me at ease (Marlena Shaw - California Soul followed by Can You Get To That by Funkadelic!) [Name of tutor] shared that as a fan of Stanislavsky the type of theatre he was into was movement based. Warm up was literally from the top of the head to toes. Taken seriously, yet very playful. I was roared at by all the students when doing the lion face exercise! Suggestions were also taken from the students and incorporated into the warm up (I.e. vocal exercise Jee, Jay, Jo, Ju repeated once per syllable then x2,x3,x4) Regular use of insider language (eg using the voice like 'landing darts' - throwing them out into space and not having ones 'face to the floor'. [name of tutor] reflected that he was guilty of doing this.

Then onto movement class itself.

Exercise 1 - 8 strides around the space then 8 bounces in time to the rhythm. Gradually made more complicated 8, then 6, then 4, then 2 then still for 8.

Exercise 2 - Linked to upcoming assessment? 'Palette' of 4 movements completed initially as a pair.

Students were coming back to this exercise ([name of tutor] said they'd had a few weeks off) yet each student remembered who they were paired with and remembered their movements. Looking across the groups, each showed

teamwork and took turns in leading the rehearsal of the sequence. Teamwork, mutuality and respect shown. Some sequences were complicated and energetic. Students frequently coming to the side to grab a drink. One student did not engage (she was holding/rubbing her stomach and seems to have a stomach ache) she was allowed to leave the studio and go to the communal space, with support staff [name of support worker] checking in.

Groups then encouraged to come together to work as a quad and to combine their respective sequences into sequences of 8 on counts of 8. Bryan, [name redacted] and Tom settled on 8 sections, but on counts of 6. Mike did not dissuade, but helped them to figure out the maths to get to a 64 beat sequence.

Plenary at the end reflecting on what was achieved.

## Appendix 4 Data Management Plan

Please note that this plan was created in consultation with the Data Management Staff at the University Library. I submitted my initial plan in order to receive feedback, and amended accordingly. The plan can be found online @ [https://dmponline.sheffield.ac.uk/plans/68101/edit?phase\\_id=7682](https://dmponline.sheffield.ac.uk/plans/68101/edit?phase_id=7682)

### The next step? Investigating long term work placements for young adults with learning disabilities.

#### Assessment of existing data

Provide an explanation of the existing data sources that will be used by the research project, with references

The research objectives require qualitative data that are not available from other sources. Initial engagement with the literature has revealed that the voices of young adults with learning disabilities are under-represented with regards to their experiences within the workplace.

The following data sources will be invaluable as I begin to position and theorise my research:

Big Society? Disabled People with Learning Disabilities and Civil Society. (Jun 2013/Sep 2105)  
Principal Investigator: Dan Goodley Project Ref: ES/K004883/1.

URL <https://bigsocietydis.wordpress.com>

This research set out to examine the impact of the Big Society project instigated by the Cameron government. There is a direct overlap of some of the research questions with my work, specifically question 1 - To what extent are people with learning disabilities participating in civil society today? and question 6 - How are people with learning disabilities experiencing opportunities for (self)advocacy, employment and community support and participation in civil society? These are both questions that will be addressed during my interviews with young adults with learning disabilities as they participate in work experience placements.

Burchardt, T. (2005): The education and employment of disabled young people: frustrated ambition. Policy Press: Bristol

An excellent, yet dated study into the realities faced by young adults with learning disabilities attempting to enter the job market. Written before the financial crash and the subsequent projects of Austerity and the introduction of the Universal Credit system initiated by the Cameron administration.

**Provide an analysis of the gaps identified between the currently available and required data for the research**

**Initial engagement with the literature reveals that the voices and thoughts of young adults with learning disabilities about their experiences of work and future employment prospects are under-documented. Data that has been gathered often predates both the project of austerity initiated by the Cameron government and the overhaul of the universal credit system implemented by the same administration. There is no clear picture of how young adults with learning disabilities are experiencing work in the aftermath of these interventions.**

**Additionally, gathered data has often focused on individuals with physical not learning**

Created using DMPonline. Last modified 28 January 2021

1 of 6

**disabilities at work, and I would like to address this gap in my proposed research. In my research I am hoping to capture the voices of young adults with learning disabilities as they participate on a work programme. By doing so it is hoped I will gain a better understanding of the outcomes arising out of the intersection of learning disability and work.**

## **Information on new data**

**Provide information on the data that will be produced or accessed by the research project**

### **Data Type and Quality**

**There will be three types of data generated during this project. These will be:**

**Image data - Generated during the Photovoice component of the research.**

**Audio data - Generated during the recordings of the interviews with the participants.**

**Textual data - Generated during the transcription of the interviews and by the participants themselves in the form of writing about their experiences.**

**The formats of the data will be in accordance with the guidance provided by the UK Data Service (<https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/format>) and will be as follows:**

**Image data will be stored as Tiff 6.0 uncompressed (.tif) files.**

**Audio data will be recorded as MPEG-1 Audio Layer 3 (.mp3) files and converted to free lossless Audio Codec (.flac) files to be stored.**

**Textual data will be stored as Rich Text Format (.rtf) files.**

**At this point it is unknown how much data will be generated. That will be reliant on the number of participants recruited to participate in the study.**

## **Data Collection**

The images collected for this research will be generated using Photovoice. This is a form of participatory photographic elicitation that places the camera into the hands of the individual participants and asks them to generate images that will in turn direct the research topics of the project.

The audio data will be collected during informal narrative interviews. This approach has been adopted in order to gather the individual stories of young adults with learning disabilities in full. The documentation of the voices of young adults with learning disabilities will offer a fresh insight into the lived experience of this group as they begin to interact with the modern workplace.

Any textual data produced by the participants (in the form of pictures, poems etc.) will be photographed and treated and stored in the same manner as image data.

## **Quality assurance of data**

Describe the procedures for quality assurance that will be carried out on the

Created using DMPonline. Last modified 28 January 2021

2 of 6

data collected at the time of data collection, data entry, digitisation and data checking.

## **Quality assurance**

With regards to data collection quality assurance will be addressed by ensuring that the recording equipment (camera and dictaphone) is in full working order before embarking on the data gathering process. The digital camera and iPad containing the dictaphone app will be tested by the researcher before each session to ensure that they are in full working order. Additionally data will only be gathered after full and informed consent has been obtained from the individual participants, and they are aware of how the data gathered is to be used by the researcher.

## **Data Authenticity**

Recognising that digital data can easily be copied or manipulated, I will ensure that only a single master file of each data exists. These files will be archived at regular intervals. As I am the sole researcher on this project, no-one else will have access to these master files. It is not anticipated that any of the audio or visual data files will be altered in any way as the purpose of the research is to document the experiences of young adults with learning disabilities using the unedited images and words gathered during the data collection process.

## **Backup and security of data**

Describe the data security and backup procedures you will adopt to ensure the data and metadata are securely stored during the lifetime of the project.

Data security and backup procedures will be informed by the guidance produced by the UK Data Service, and guidance from The University of Sheffield. Copies of this information can be found at [www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/rdm/storage](http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/rdm/storage) and [ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/store](http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/store)

In practice my security and backup procedures will entail the following:

I will use the university filestore (X:Drive) to store master copies of my data.

Data that is gathered in the field using either the digital camera or the dictaphone will be uploaded onto the X:Drive as soon as possible after collection. The images/recordings residing on the hardware will be deleted as soon as the upload is successfully completed

Digital files containing sensitive data (Participant names etc) will be encrypted.

I will employ a fixed folder structure and file naming convention that will allow me to manage and keep track of data efficiently.

Firewall and up to date anti-virus software are installed on the personal computer belonging to the researcher.

When not in use, this computer will be stored in a secure location in the home of the researcher.

Created using DMPonline. Last modified 28 January 2021

3 of 6

## Management and curation of data

Outline your plans for preparing, organising and documenting data. Study-Level Documentation

I will provide a comprehensive account of the data collection methods and the data collection protocols used. This will involve a full explanation of the Photovoice element and a description of the structures of the qualitative interviews. I will create a comprehensive log to ensure that any pseudonymised/anonymised data in the form of images, interviews and transcripts can be ascribed to the correct authors. I will also detail the instruments and technology used to capture the data.

The photographic images will all be numbered, dated and labelled with the pseudonyms of the individual who generated the image during the process of uploading of the images onto the secure drive.

The overall file structure, whilst not yet finalised, will hold the transcript data and photographic data separate. Within these will be subfolders that collect together the relevant data from each participant.

My transcripts will all have the following attributes:

A unique identifier drawn from the pseudonymised name of the individual

Each transcript will have a cover sheet that will detail the time, date, location of the event alongside the name of the interviewee. Any written notes jotted down during the interview will be written up and added as an appendix to the interview.

Each transcription will adopt the same format and layout. Lines of dialogue will be numbered to facilitate easy reference when analysing the text. Speaker tags will be used to indicate the flow of the conversation. There will be line breaks that correspond to turn-takes. Finally the pages of the transcript will be numbered.

With regards to the transcription method, I shall adopt a naturalised approach. I will document reported speech 'as heard' and not attempt to clean or tidy up the data in any way. I want to retain the unique and idiosyncratic voices and speech patterns because historically the voices of young adults with learning disabilities have not been faithfully documented.

## **Difficulties in data sharing and measures to overcome these**

Identify any potential obstacles to sharing your data, explain which and the possible measures you can apply to overcome these.

The obvious obstacle surrounds the copyright of the aural and visual data generated by

Created using DMPonline. Last modified 28 January 2021

4 of 6

the participants, both of which are their property. This will be overcome by including consent for data sharing in the informed consent document that will be signed by individual wishing to participate in the study, and discussing the ways in which I will want to use images/transcripts during the recruitment of people for the study.

## **Consent, anonymisation and strategies to enable further re-use of data**

Make explicit mention of the planned procedures to handle consent for data sharing for data obtained from human participants, and/or how to anonymise data, to make sure that data can be made available and accessible for future scientific research.

Following the guidance on the UK Data Service Website, <https://www.ukdataservice.ac.uk/manage-data/legal-ethical/anonymisation/qualitative.aspx>, the first step will be to anonymise the workplace and pseudonymise the participants. I will create a comprehensive log to make a record of

these changes, so that errors of misidentification are avoided during my use of the data. The pseudonymisation log will be deleted one year after the submission of the thesis to allow the researcher to attend to any issues that may arise after submission.

Any personal details gathered during the course of the research will be held for one year after submission of the thesis to allow the researcher to deal with any issues that may arise following submission. At the end of this period, all personal data will be deleted

During the write up I will also avoid the use of direct and indirect identifiers that may lead to participants/site of research being identified.

At the end of the process only anonymised transcriptions will be shared with the UK Data Services repository, Reshare.

## **Copyright and intellectual property ownership**

State who will own the copyright and IPR of any new data that you will generate.

Following the guidance on the UK Data Service Website, [ukdataservice.ac.uk/management/data/rights.aspx](http://ukdataservice.ac.uk/management/data/rights.aspx), the copyright for the new data generated in this research will reside in the first instance with the young adults with learning disability who will be the participants in this project.

Specifically, they will own the copyright over both the textual data and the photographs produced as part of the Photovoice element of the project.

In order to gain the right to either 'publish large extracts of data, or archive transcripts' I will explain the ways in which I might use the data during the initial recruitment meeting with the young adults with learning disabilities. I will also reiterate the ways in which the gathered data might be used in the informed consent document that will be signed by

Created using DMPonline. Last modified 28 January 2021

5 of 6

each participant.

## **Responsibilities**

**Outline responsibilities for data management within research teams at all partner institutions**

As the sole researcher, I will assume all responsibility for all data management on this project.

Created using DMPonline. Last modified 28 January 2021

6 of 6



