

National SHAPE Network Conference
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Supporting the Cultural Expression of Disabled People Through the Arts *
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1 Introduction

(a) Artability Conference

It is important to appreciate that the organisation and cancellation of the Artability Conference is a symptom of the profound lack of understanding about what is happening in the world of disabled people in the UK at the moment.

Unfortunately the Artability Conference organisers have been, to use a phrase made popular in Australia recently, 'economic with the truth' regarding the criticisms from disabled people about the conference.

It is important not to think that the criticism was coming only from one group, the Greater Manchester Coalition of Disabled People (GMCDP) but that the conference was universally criticised by all members of the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People (BCODP) and that the criticism was not confined to inaccessibility and lack of participation in the planning by disabled people but included a criticism of the whole philosophy and perception of the relationship of disabled people to the arts.

It is also important to appreciate that the disabled people making the criticisms were unanimous in their desire to look for ways of salvaging something positive from the conference but that we were only given the option of the conference continuing more or less as originally arranged with minor and insignificant changes or not at all.

One of the central problems has been that able-bodied professional and voluntary workers have never considered it essential to consult and develop collaborative ways of working with us. The result is a gross lack of awareness concerning the thinking, perceptions and re-organisation that has been going on amongst disabled people in the community.

It should be noted that this global lack of understanding applies to the Attenbrough Report also and that criticisms of this report will no doubt follow in due course.

The tragedy, then, is that those working in the field are now so cut off from the views of disabled people that they do not know what is going on – the latest example is the Royal College of Physicians recent two reports which set out to increase medical control over disabled people in the community; somewhat sugared and presented as improved management service proposals.

There can be no doubt that there has been a radical change in the thinking and situation of disabled people and that this means those working in the field must learn to regard the views of disabled people more seriously. It is also important not to confuse the views of individuals with the collective views of disabled people arrived at by democratic processes.

(b) Emancipation

We need to remind ourselves that it is a human characteristic to try to make the world to suit ourselves (to change the world according to our desires) and that no other animal does this.

* These brief speaker-notes were used for an extended presentation at the annual SHAPE network conference. It was the first public meeting where I promoted the need for a disability arts and culture

On the other hand it is clear that disabled people have never had any important impact on shaping the world according to what we want? We should ask, why not?

There are two views why this may have been so – (i) because we are disabled we cannot actively participate in social life to influence the world we live in; and (ii) we have not had an influence in shaping the world because we have been prevented from doing so. The traditional view is that disability is a personal tragedy which results in ‘inability’ and ‘dependency’. But is this interpretation satisfactory?

One interpretation is that disabled people have faced three different phases in their history. The first, before the industrial revolution, was one where disabled people were a part of the community, although at the bottom end of the economic ladder. The second phase was introduced with mass production processes brought in by the industrial revolution. This meant the introduction of machines designed to be operated by ‘normal’ human beings (the ‘hands’) and this in turn prevented disabled people from participating in the economic life of the community. In the third modern technology has made it possible once more for disabled people to fully participate in economic life.

The basic problem, then, is that disabled people have been prevented from participating in society – we are an oppressed group – and like all oppressed groups the main struggle is one of emancipation – i.e. to be able to participate in changing and manipulating the world according to our own perception of our needs and desires.

The struggle for emancipation requires disabled people to become active agents of change. Because our exclusion from society has been so thorough and lasted for such a long time, however, we have become very passive and now we need to re-learn how to become active and creative in our own interests.

Involvement in the arts is one of the important channels for the cultivation and encouragement of creative imagination.

2 The struggle for imagination

(a) The identity crisis

The confusion about whether disability is a personal tragedy or a form of oppression creates a confusion amongst disabled people regarding who we are.

This confusion is made worse because nearly all role models presented to disabled people are able-bodied (e.g. parents, teachers and other helpers such as SHAPE workers are nearly all able-bodied).

The expression of the individual disabled person’s experience through the arts does not tell us anything more than the state of that individual’s feelings and personal interpretations of disability. As such, individual views and artistic works should not be regarded as representative, unless there is widely held recognition from the collective disabled community (not the able-bodied community!).

Art forms which successfully translate the essence of disability into accessible images reflect the collective, or social, experience of disabled people. This is precisely what all good art is about – i.e. being reflective and in tune with a collective social experience.

The active involvement of disabled people in the struggle for emancipation requires the identification of a collective identity and a will for action. Involvement in the arts can have a very important role in the expression and development of this collective identity.

(b) Separate in order to join

Change in the social situation of disabled people will not be achieved by confusing the issues that have to be solved. Nor can the oppression of disabled people be resolved by idealistic approaches – e.g. the aim of achieving integration through the arbitrary mixing of disabled and non-disabled people in PHAB clubs (which were started by ‘well-meaning’ able-bodied people with little or no understanding of the social nature of disability).

It is important to grasp the point that before there can be any real negotiation for a world which takes proper account of the views of disabled people it is necessary to have two sides to the negotiation process. If our side does not exist, however, or if we are simply thrown together with able-bodied people, we can only exert an influence for change as unrepresentative individuals.

Able-bodied people working in the field of disability, of course, have long recognised the importance of achieving influence through organising for unity – e.g. the growth of professions and training programmes for (able-bodied) people working in the field of disability. Why do so many of these same able-bodied people oppose the right of disabled people to form our own organisations?

This is not to say that disabled people should not join organisations concerned with disability issues, even if they are set up and run by non-disabled people, but it seems clear that before we do this we need to cultivate our confidence, strength and ideas through our own separate groups.

This means that instead of disabled people wasting our limited time and energies on presenting disability to able-bodied people (e.g. the traditional poster campaigns to change the attitudes of non-disabled people, like the latest series of posters from the Spastics Society, or the former GLC’s Disability Resource Unit poster campaign) we must develop ourselves, our own identity and our culture.

3 The bankruptcy of traditional approaches

(a) On integration

Most approaches concerned with identifying disability and promoting integration confuse these concepts with the pressure to make disabled people conform to able-bodied social and physical standards. The Office of Population Census and Statistics (OPCS) definitions of impairment, disability and handicap used in their survey of disabled people in the UK and the World Health Organisation (WHO) definitions of impairment, disability and handicap, for example, try to measure degree of disability by looking at our ability to function in an able-bodied designed world.

Organisations started by able-bodied people like PHAB, RADAR, the Spastics Society and Cheshire Homes all start from able-bodied assumptions that disability is a personal tragedy rather than that the central problem that we face is the pressure on us to conform to and live in an able-bodied designed world.

Most activities involving the arts and disability also start from traditional able-bodied tragedy assumptions about disabled people and the approach seems to be mainly concerned with improving access to able-bodied arts.

We need to separate questions concerned with access to the arts from questions concerned with the development and expression of a disability identity through the arts.

(b) On accountability

Inappropriate approaches to integration, whether in the arts or any other social activity, result from the lack of an active involvement of disabled people in the development of ideas. This means that the question of 'accountability' has to be sorted out.

People who are sympathetic to disabled people will only start getting things right when better accountability measures are built into all projects, otherwise they will go wrong (like the Artability Conferences – what a horrible and insulting title).

We must also distinguish accountability to the individual from accountability to the group that the organisation serves.

Accountability to the individual disabled person means involving that individual in all decisions which affect them as well as avoiding all manipulative approaches (such as found in rehabilitation where the medical and paramedical professions have a particular obsession with our lack of 'motivation' when their efforts to manipulate our lives are not welcomed with open arms).

Accountability to disabled people as a group means being true to the image and identity that we collectively wish to project for ourselves. This can only be achieved by ensuring democratic representation of disabled people within, say, SHAPE at all power levels in the organisation. Representation from disabled controlled organisations in the power structure of, say SHAPE, is also a way of strengthening the representative views of disabled people within the organisation.

(c) On art as therapy

No doubt all art is, in a sense, therapeutic (and art therapy has a role in helping people with psychological problems) but why do able-bodied people tend to think that disabled people, as a group, have a particular need for art therapy (or sport for that matter)?

There can be no doubt that the able-bodied designed world prevents us from doing all sorts of things and, quite rightly, that this causes us a lot of resentment. However, it seems the resentment is interpreted as if it were the result of personal tragedy. The resentment, then, rather than the cause of it, becomes the focus of therapeutic intervention. The fact that we are excluded from employment, and so have much leisure time for the arts, seems to have been combined with our assumed need for therapy; hence art therapy (or educational programmes to teach us how to achieve 'significant living without work').

The promotion of arts for disabled people, I cannot help adding, is also a wonderful way of able-bodied people giving other able-bodied people awards for helping nonable-bodied people (what would we feel about men running art therapy groups for women and then awarding themselves for services to women?)

4 The way forward for sympathisers

(a) Changing perspectives

Clearly there is a need for genuine non-disabled sympathisers to change perspective if they are to really assist disabled people achieve emancipation. This means seeing disability through the eyes of disabled people; i.e. seeing 'disability' as the result of the way able-bodied people, and the way they have designed the world for themselves, discriminates against people who are physically impaired (whether motor, visually, aurally or intellectually).

Disabled people want committed help, not the distant, so-called, objectivity of the able-bodied perspective.

The modern growth of organisations of disabled people shows that we have a clearer idea of what needs to be done, and we are organising to do it, but if there is to be a role for an able-bodied controlled organisation (or able-bodied person) in this process depends on how much that organisation (or individual) wants to help or how much that organisation (or person) wishes to control us.

This means able-bodied people, personally and in organisations, can make a positive contribution by providing committed assistance to our efforts to reach our own goals.

(b) Outstanding issues for discussion

I have tried to indicate the important issues which concern all disabled people in our relationship with able-bodied people and organisations. To summarise, I think the following are the issues that ought to be discussed during the workshops over the next two days:

- how do we maintain personal and social accountability in service provision?
- what are the identity issues for disabled people?
- where are the appropriate role models?
- can there be a disability culture and what might this mean for the arts?
- integration – what is it, who decides?
- is there any longer a place for the medical, tragedy, or administrative approaches to services for disabled people?
- rehabilitation, who needs it?

(c) Historical responsibility

In conclusion I would like to draw attention to our historical responsibility – we need to be accountable to future generations. Throughout history disabled people have suffered discrimination but now, in our generation, for the first time in history, there is the real prospect of even the most severely disabled person achieving full integration into society.

This is an awesome and exciting responsibility on our generation. We must rise to the occasion by not only reflecting on the problems that we face but also by being creative in helping to establish a distinctive, confident and living disability culture.