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Scena Otwarta. Self-advocates in theatre



Intra-sensual theatre mini course
and inclusive theatre workshop

Scena Otwarta is a tool of inclusive theatre education allowing individuals with various needs (with vision and hearing impairments/d/Deaf) to develop their creativity and in the long term also to work at a professional theatre.

Who is the innovation is targeted at?

For those who are interested in culture and creative development in the field of theatre, including people with vision impairments (blind or with low vision), d/Deaf and hearing-impaired individuals, as well as those who can see and hear.

The innovation is targeted both at people with some stage experience and at theatre enthusiasts who only want to start developing in this direction.

Who can implement the innovation?

The innovation can be pursued at public, private or indie theatres, at community centres or drama schools, engaging:

- theatre makers (directors, actors, actresses),
- choreography, dance specialists and people working with movement and body,
- theatre pedagogues and educators,
- everyone who is concerned about the accessibility of culture and about inclusive art.

What problems does the innovation address?

According to a report compiled after the first European Arts and Disability Cluster meeting ¹ in the mainstream culture and art there are few artists with disabilities, while the art education curricula do not take account of the needs of such individuals, and the cultural offer for people with disabilities is insufficient.

What is noteworthy is that a change is currently taking place at Polish theatres. More attention is paid to accessibility of facilities and institution programmes to people with different needs. Nevertheless, Blind and d/Deaf individuals are mainly represented in the audience. Thinking in terms of opening the stage and cooperation with people with disabilities and d/Deaf artists is still an uncommon practice. Few positive examples indicate that theatre based on diversity can set a new, even more exciting stage in the history of stage art. To make it possible, we need accessible drama education allowing blind and d/Deaf people develop creatively in this area. But it is still missing to a large extent.

No blind or d/Deaf people get trained at drama schools, as a result of which blind and deaf actors and actresses, namely people with disabilities and self-advocates – are virtually not represented on the professional stage. The problem is true not only for drama schools but also for theatre groups at community centres and workshops at professional theatres. And this is where children and teens start taking interest in theatre and developing their talent.

¹ Betina Panagiotara, Ben Evans, Filip Pawlak, *Disabled artists in the mainstream: A new cultural agenda for Europe*, report from the first European Arts and Disability Cluster meeting (The Hague, November 30, 2019), <https://www.britishcouncil.pl/projekty/sztuka/sztuka-i-niepelnosprawnosc/artysci-z-niepelnosprawnoscia-w-glownym-nurcie-kultury-i-sztuki>, https://www.disabilityartsinternational.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Report_A-new-cultural-agenda-for-Europe_in-Polish.pdf.

Polish theatres still far too rarely are prepared to cooperate with blind or d/Deaf creators. Barriers result from insufficient architectural and communication and information accessibility, and from the perception of art created by blind and d/Deaf individuals. It is often treated as a form of occupational therapy or amateur activity. Accessible drama education can help visually-impaired and d/Deaf persons gain recognisability on the stage and become theatre creators.

An increasing number of theatre initiatives for visually- and hearing-impaired individuals, starting from theatre groups at community centres to access to acting studies can significantly accelerate the change at professional theatres that will have to consider not only accessibility of the auditorium but also cooperation with creators with disabilities.

It is still necessary to increase the availability of the theatre programme to audiences with disabilities. At the time being, accessibility is only an addition and is limited to audio description for performances that have already been prepared and then staged with audio description from time to time. The innovation shows that culture can be designed in a universal manner and that accessibility can be an integral element of creative activities.

I persistently strove to conduct workshops integrating blind, d/Deaf and seeing and hearing individuals. Many people [...] discouraged me from this idea as risky. I felt I knew what to do to make it possible, and the reality confirmed my intuitions and ideas.

Katarzyna Peplinska-Pietrzak, author of the innovation

How to implement the innovation at your end, step by step?

Step one: analyse resources

Think what resources you start implementing the model with. There is no one good answer here. Think about both tangible resources (for instance, proper space) and intangible ones such as talent and values that you find essential.

Step two: establish a partnership

If you want to conduct a workshop and are an independent artist or an educator not permanently affiliated to any institution, you will need space. Hence, it will be essential to find a partner.





If you work at an institution, school or an organisation, you can also consider a partnership, e.g., with an organisation gathering people with disabilities. Accessibility is a team game, and multitude of perspectives will enrich your actions.

Step three: create a team

To conduct a workshop, you will need a team to run it, e.g., actors and actresses, directors, and theatre pedagogues. Decide who you want to invite to cooperate with. It will also be essential to engage a coordinator supervising the entire venture, people having experience in work with individuals with disabilities and persons responsible for promoting the event.

If your team is made exclusively of the so-called 'able-bodied' individuals, invite people with disabilities, too.

Step four: run consultations

Consultation is a moment when you can listen to the needs and ideas suggested by potential addressees. Never skip including self-advocates in the process.

Step five: analyse the budget

Think if you have sufficient financial means, e.g., for the remuneration for workshop facilitators and other experts and optionally to rent a venue and implement systems improving its accessibility, for promotion, and workshop materials.

Step six: plan the time

Plan the workshop several months in advance. Start recruiting participants at least 3 weeks before the event.

Optimal duration of a single workshop is 4–6 hours. Remember to ensure a longer break for a meal (lasting ca. 30–40 minutes) and a shorter one.

Try to plan a cycle made of at least three workshops:

1. A workshop for blind and visually-impaired individuals and for seeing and hearing people.
2. A workshop for hearing-impaired and d/Deaf individuals and for seeing and hearing people.
3. A workshop for blind and visually-impaired individuals, hearing-impaired and d/Deaf individuals and for seeing and hearing people.

The third workshop should end with an artistic micro-activity prepared by all participants.

Step seven: organise the space

Ideally, the workshop should take place in a space without the traditional division into the stage and auditorium. Try to execute the model in a space that is architecturally accessible. Ensure comfort for participants.

Step eight: cater for the participants' needs

Cater for workshop participants' needs. Identify the needs of blind and visually-impaired individuals, d/Deaf and hearing-impaired persons. Remember about audio description, mock-ups, and touchable objects, interpretation into the Polish sign language (PJM). Offer assistant support.

Step nine: workshop facilitation methods

The proposed workshop facilitation methods include improvisation, physical exercise, choreography, pantomime, basic acting tasks, work on artistic expression, short performances in teams, drama tasks, work with music and sound.

Step ten: workshop topic

Workshops should be based on the idea of multi-sensory experience and intra-sensual translation. Accessibility is an integral part of their curriculum and a creative strategy in such a workshop model.

Step eleven: promotion and recruitment

The recommended workshop group should be made of not more than 12 individuals: four blind or visually impaired persons, four d/Deaf and hearing-impaired persons, and four seeing and hearing persons. The form of recruitment must take account of the needs of visually – and hearing – impaired individuals. The recruitment is also a good moment to explore the needs. One should bear in mind the fact that the lack of artistic experience should not be a factor determining the decision about admitting a candidate to the workshop. Unfortunately, people with disabilities and d/Deaf persons still have limited opportunities to gain the necessary experience.





What is particularly noteworthy?

- Participants' artistic development is just as important as boosting their self-esteem.
- Each workshop should be run by two individuals. One person should focus on achieving the goals, while the other should supervise the group process and organisational issues.
- Work in a group with highly diversified needs and communication between blind and d/Deaf individuals can be highly challenging. Hence, cooperation with interpreters of the Polish sign language is essential.

- At the beginning of the first workshop, it is a good idea to sign a contract with participants, specifying good cooperation principles. Do not forget about rounds to gather feedback on participants' wellbeing, their expectations and needs. During the final round ask them about impressions, insights, and emotions after the workshop.

Does it work? How does the innovation help its beneficiaries?

The pilot round of the innovation achieved the assumed effects, namely the test participants (both innovation beneficiaries and facilitators) confirmed an increase of their artistic competencies, knowledge, and skills related to basic artistic tools needed to create a performance. Their knowledge on accessibility of theatrical performances and inclusion of audiences with various needs to artistic ventures was also enriched.

What is particularly important is that a joint workshop for visually- and hearing-impaired persons shows that it is possible to overcome in practice the barriers between these two worlds. A noticeable outcome was an increase in the level of understanding for a different way of perceiving reality. Participants were given an opportunity to imagine how the world was perceived with different senses not available to them. Visually- and hearing-impaired individuals are separated from the world of the 'able-bodied' community, but there is also a barrier between these two worlds. The innovation created an opportunity to collaborate for people perceiving reality differently but sharing the common passion for theatre.

During the workshop I felt that we are the same as hearing people, as earlier I had problems with understanding them, I did not know them well enough.

I feel privileged that I could experience such classes and emotions.

I feel less overawed, because the classes allow me to share the world with other different people.

I will come for the next class, because I want to practice with the theatre.

For the first time I could participate in classes attended simultaneously by deaf, blind and seeing and hearing people, and it was truly revealing to me – I could see that we could unite, that we could be an integrated world in action.

The above quotes come from comments made by participants of the pilot implementation of the innovation.

How much does it cost?

Employees of the culture and art sector often struggle with modest budgets or the lack of specialist support. The author tried to take account of this perspective when preparing the model. Hence, the final cost depends on numerous factors, such as resources that are already at your disposal (e.g., venue, facilitator team), number of workshop hours or workshop materials that you decide to select.

The cost of implementing the innovation in the form of three workshops includes:

- remuneration for workshop facilitators (e.g., theatre educators, actors and actresses, directors) – at least two individuals;
- interpretation into the Polish sign language – ideally four interpreters;

- audio description – for audio-visual materials or live objects, e.g., describing to blind persons a performance of other groups (additionally – an assistant to blind individuals);
- accessible space to conduct workshops and optionally equipment and systems improving space accessibility, e.g., a hearing loop;
- workshop materials;
- preparation of accessible promotional materials and participant recruitment.

The cost of running a 6-day workshop amounts to ca. PLN 30,000, assuming that all the above elements are included.

It is also advisable to consider catering for participants and photo and audiovisual documentation along with access paths (audio description, SDH subtitles, interpretation into the Polish sign language), the cost of which amounts to ca. PLN 7,000.

But remember that initially you can conduct one workshop only. You might already have a venue at your disposal, have access to equipment increasing accessibility, work in a team of educators having experience in running inclusive activities. The final cost of the innovation is determined by the individual situation of persons or institutions interested in implementing it.

Who is the author of the innovation?



Katarzyna Peplinska-Pietrzak – theatre pedagogue, theatre education specialist, accessibility coordinator and trainer, creator of multisensory performances, audio descriptor. Member of the Accessibility Network Leaders established by the Kultura bez Barrier Foundation. Graduate of theatre and performance studies at the Jagiellonian University and an experimental choreography course organised by the Burdąg Foundation and Centrum w Ruchu. Author and coordinator of creative programmes for children, youths, adults, seniors, individuals with disabilities. In the period 2017–2022, she worked at the Wilam Horzycza Theatre in Toruń, specialising in theatre education, accessibility coordination, as well as the art and educational programme, by organising sightseeing tours of the theatre with audio description for blind and visually-impaired individuals, multisensory workshops, performances with audio description, and creative projects.

In 2021, she was awarded the 'Friend of the Blind' badge by the Polish Association of the Blind. Now affiliated with the National Old Theatre in Kraków where she tested her innovation and now serves the function of an accessibility coordinator. She is also responsible for the accessibility of the District Culture Animation Centre in Toruń. She conducts proprietary artistic and educational programmes for individuals with various needs, e.g., choreography workshops for blind youths.

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Uncommon solutions to common problems

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