# I’m Me – Co-facilitation and Representation

Kelsie:

Hello, and welcome to Conversations in Social Justice, the podcast series for the Institute for Social Justice. Today we are chatting about, I’m Me, an AHRC funded collaboration between the Institute for Social Justice, and Mind the Gap, one of England's leading companies in learning disability, performance, and live arts. I'm Me uses creative methods to explore artists with learning disabilities and autism's understandings of identity, representation ,and voice. In this project artists at Mind the Gap, develop a Doodle Book, a pack of creative prompts which is then shared with a network of six other learning disability performance companies across the UK. These companies then generate their own creative responses to these prompts on identity, representation and voice. This podcast series consists of conversations about topics arising from the project.

I'm Kelsie Acton, postdoctoral researcher with I'm Me. In this podcast Alison from Mind the Gap talks to Amy and Victoria from Hijinx about co facilitation and representation.

Alison:

Please introduce yourselves.

Victoria:

Okay, so my name is Victoria and I am from the Hijinx West Academy.

Amy:

And my name is Amy. I'm the academy director at Hijinx. So we have five academies across Wales all that have the aim of professional training for those who identify as learning disabled and autistic who have experienced barriers being able to access mainstream training or drama schools.

Alison:

I’m Alison, I’m an artist at Mind the Gap but also research assistance for the I’m Me project.

Kelsie:

I'm Kelsie, I'm a postdoctoral researcher on the I'm Me project.

Alison:

Victoria, would you like to tell us a bit about your artistic practice?

Amy:

I just going to give a bit of Hijinx context first. In terms of, so we are inclusive theater company, first and foremost. And what we mean by that is that all of our work, whether that be work that starts within our academies or our participation, kind of community groups or our professional productions is all created with learning disabled and/or autistic or neurodivergent artists as part of that process and cast, so always people in that space who identify as learning disabled. And there are always people in that space who when our professional work is created, who don't identify as disabled. But the idea is that the creation of all of our work stems from the lived experiences of people in that room. Victoria, did you want to talk a little bit about your artistic practice within the academies and maybe what you enjoy doing and creating?

Victoria:

Yes. So I enjoy doing is, we do all the different variety of acting, dancing. And yeah. And I'm also enjoying the I'm Me project, which is very interesting.

Alison:

What's your preferred disability language?

Victoria:

So, I classify me as disabled. I am, I got Downs Syndrome. And I'm also deaf in both ears but also, just being confident as I am. So, yes.

Amy:

There's an interesting question for us. In terms of our preferred, disability language and it's a bit of an ongoing conversation to be honest in Hijinx because we talk quite often about social model versus medical model. And obviously, we very much subscribe to the social model with which, you would say disability first. So we would say learning disabled artists, or learning disabled participants. However, we're also really aware that a lot of our learning disabled community prefer people first language. And belong to people first groups they would prefer it to be person first. So we kind of we navigate that really slightly dependent on the audience and the participants and the artist preference. But yes, we would say we work with learning disabled, artists, and/or autistic, or neurodivergent artists.

Alison:

So Victoria, how do you describe your role on I’m Me?

Victoria:

Yes. So my role is as a lead artist and as facilitator, I find it very interesting and getting to lead a different games and sessions. I also describe my role as very important and interesting and make sure that other people talk.

Alison:

Amy, can you describe your role on I’m Me?

Amy:

Yes. So on I'm Me, I am, I think technically called the lead facilitator or a lead facilitator. Although, in reality it's very much, a co-facilitation process with our lead artist. I think my role is to bring hopefully a lot of experience as a facilitator into the space. But also really to encourage, support Victoria's artistic decisions around, what pages of the Doodle Books to use, around what exercises she feel works best or would be most interesting to explore and to just help the artists in that space who I know quite well to be able to engage in their own way with each of those activities. So, yes, certainly the kind of co-facilitation role.

Alison:

Victoria, how has your role on I’m Me grown and evolved?

Victoria:

 I kind of learned that the I'm Me role has grown. I kind of learnt that about talking more about the difficult subjects and some people don't want to talk about difficult subjects. I think, I kind of learned that everyone is different as well.

Amy:

Yeah. I just like to add kind of observation really, that in terms of how I think the role of the lead artist has grown in terms of our first sessions, Victoria has always come in with a wealth of knowledge and ability in terms of leading sessions but perhaps before this hasn't had as much opportunity to really flex those skills as a facilitator. But I've seen incredible growth in terms of the confidence and ability to lead, really large portions of sessions. It's gone from leading warm-up games and exercises to leading really quite in-depth discussions and exercises around things that are quite complicated. And making some really interesting artistic decisions about how to what the next step would be. And kind of exploring that, which has been. Yeah, fantastic. So, just a real growth of those skills as a leader, and a facilitator in that space.

Alison:

I’m wondering, Amy and Victoria, you’ve developed a really interesting partnership with I’m Me. What makes you work well together?

Victoria:

Well, I think what makes us together, well, is we both kind of feed off each other and we agree what sessions that we do, and different games I do. And I think, and I just feel like this is a great. It's a great team.

Amy:

Yeah. Like absolutely, I really agree with that. I think my kind of real reflection is that I have co-facilitated many projects before and I think it's a really rare to be able to pretty constantly come into a space with a co-facilitator that is really open. And coming in with that, without any kind of preconceived ideas and for that to be the case on both sides as well. So that you're really exploring and discovering, what the session might be together. I think maybe previously I might have been slightly scared of that and thought, no, I need to over plan, but prior to any conversation. But actually what I've learned as a facilitator is on my, it's so much more interesting when you remain kind of open and flexible and discovering all these things as a team.

Alison:

Did you ever get to explore the idea of allyship in the Doodle Book and has that idea helped you work together?

Amy:

Certainly in this kind of partnership between Victoria and I, I think the idea of being an ally has been important. Even though we may not talk about, not have talked about it in so many words. I suppose what I'm reflecting on, is the fact that these discussions, we have prior to every session, we do get to a point where I often turn around to Victoria and say, “But what do you think? Because you're the one with lived experience here”. And my role is to try and help and support and raise your voice and the understanding, but very much with the kind of the knowledge that it’s Victoria, that's really bringing the lived experience and that kind of, understanding of learning disability to the table. Obviously, for me, working about Hijinx, allyship is a huge part of what we do. We are there to advocate and to try and create better representation of artists in society and within the industry that we work in.

Alison:

You were one of the few groups on I’m Me that had talked about learning disability representation before I'm Me. So can you tell me a bit about how you explored this idea?

Victoria:

I think again, we kind of learned that people are very open and get to really talk about representation. And we mainly talked about like disabilities that are, that could be on TV film.

Amy:

So, yeah. Hijinks regularly do hold space and time for conversations around identity representation, and voice, usually, as part of a specific project. So, with this specific group of people, with a particular outcome in mind, which might be working towards a certain piece or certain show or. But what I think's been really interesting about this project, is really being able to dedicate time to these subjects in larger groups. And to be able to really explore how each individual engages, and it's a few things have come to light within that. In terms of, I think we were both surprised by how many individuals there were across each of group who weren’t wholy comfortable with identifying as learning disabled, when we really explored the topics and had had negative experiences that had really impacted their idea of what that label meant and how that meant that they were perceived. And because we were able to explore these topics with the Doodle Books in a safe way where people could engage in their own time and in, in the kind of the way that best suited them. And because there was no immediate really big important, artistic output that needed to come the other side. I think we did get a better understanding of some of our artists kind of real feelings towards some of these topics and actually the variety in those experiences as well.

Kelsie:

So, one of the things that's come out of from other groups is that it's hard, sometimes to talk about representation because it's really hard to understand how representation on TV, or theater changes people's lives when councils have no budget for services, when the really practical bits of day-to-day life are hard. But you've had lots of conversations about representation even before this project. Why is it important to talk about representation?

Victoria:

I think for me, it's definitely, in capital letters is very important. Because I feel like representation I think, like again, there will, they're all different and they all want to shine. And to make them to feel that they're better person and they’re not like, they're not just good there and, you know, they're all amazing and what they do. Yeah, I think it's good to be out there and just to say, you know, even though I'm not perfect, but actually I'm amazing at doing different things. And I think a lot of people really care about that, that they can be the best version of themselves and just to be more out there and open and just be, yeah, just be their interesting selves.

Amy:

Art is supposed to be certainly, at least, on our TV screens and in our films and on our airways, reflective of our society. And I think there is a general kind of understanding or just acceptance whether it's right or wrong, that what we are seeing on our televisions, whether that be the news or a Netflix series or...is to a large degree, reflective of the world outside of our window. So, if large portions of society, important portions of society with very different experiences, perhaps to our own, or my own, I can only speak to myself, are being left out or ignored it's incredibly easy for John Doe to just believe that there are not many people in society that we need to worry about who are having these experiences. Or it becomes a really easy excuse for the people who have the power to change things to not. So therefore representation, everybody understanding that there is a portion, you know, a much larger portion of society who do identify as learning disabled, who do identify as autistic, neurodivergent, physically, disabled, is so important to then be able to change that narrative. Yes, it when things are so immediate, of course, you can get caught up in the kind of the day-to-day in the firefighting of the most immediate issue. But the big picture change is massively helped by being represented, more appropriately in those, in those places on our screens, on our tvs, in our theaters.

Victoria:

Totally agreed.

Alison:

I think it's important because growing up there was very little representation. And if you did manage to track down something with a learning disabled person they would fit the stereotype - like to keep to themselves. Usually quiet and not speaking often. And its for those reasons my Mum didn’t think myself or my sister could possibly be autistic. Well when she heard about the misconceptions she found, we did a fair bit. Where, so that one of us wouldn't have any trouble asking for her teacher how old they were, despite the fact it was completely inappropriate, wanting to be friends with everybody. And, you know, some of these things if you think about it, the stereotype, not talking, not outgoing. It's complete reversal, but it doesn’t mean we’re not disabled in some shape or form. And so we need a true representation of, the entire rainbos, the entire spectrum of disability for society to truly understand.

Amy:

I just wanted to add actually my previous answer was really focused on the kind of being an actor and an artist in that world and how that can impact in terms of representation. But I do think there have been some really really interesting conversations happening around Hijinx at the moment and also that have come to light through this project around other places where potentially people aren't being adequately represented. And there isn't enough reputation in that space. And there's a lot of talk at the minute about how we can include our artists in more of our strategic planning and organizational planning. So, that there are people who identify as learning disabled, who we can help to empower to get to the highest point in organizations, and what came through in this project, is who's writing those projects who's producing in those projects, who's researching for those projects to ensure that actually was being reflected is real or lived experiences from people, who identify as learning, disabled, and autistic.