



Liselle Terret, Lecturer in Applied Theatre, Coventry University and former Lecturer in Applied Theatre, The Royal Central School of Speech & Drama

Interviewed by Emma McFarland, Research & Mapping Lead, Diverse Futures

Liselle Terret is Lecturer in Applied Theatre at Coventry University. Previously she was a lecturer at Royal Central School of Speech & Drama (RCSSD) in London and was instrumental in setting up the Performance Making Diploma there for students with learning disabilities in partnership with Access All Areas. She has spent much of her career working to extend opportunities for disabled people in the performing arts.

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How did you become committed to widening access to higher education for students with learning disabilities?

I began my career as a Drama teacher and then moved into teaching in special needs schools. This was an eye opener for me as I became aware of my own limitations when working with disabled and sensory impaired children. I developed my pedagogical (teaching) skills by working in the classroom, observing other teachers and by facilitating pupil-led drama and cross-arts projects, as well as completing a one-year course on Intensive Interaction. My commitment to working with learning disabled children and young people continued when I became Education Officer at the Half Moon Young People's Theatre, London where we received Children in Need funding to develop the company's youth theatre to create more opportunities for disabled young people. This work led to an Arts Council funded conference that I curated called *Off the Page* in 2001 that focused on accessible ways of devising theatre for and with young people.

As a lecturer in Applied Theatre at The Royal Central School of Speech & Drama (RCSSD), I was always committed to breaking down the barriers to access into and within higher education for disabled students, and so I developed collaborations with Access All Areas and Graeae. Nick Llewellyn, Artistic Director of Access All Areas and I worked together for many years bringing learning disabled performers and facilitators into RCSSD to work with the students. We discussed Access All Areas setting up the Performance Making Diploma course specifically for learning disabled performers at RCSSD. I approached the head of Central Connects (a department within RCSSD that has a remit that includes widening participation). Once we had the go-ahead, we then applied and succeeded in a funding bid to The Leverhulme Trust.

The one-year part-time Performance Making Diploma was launched in January 2014 and its first cohort of students graduated in July 2014. The first year has been a great success and we're so excited about the future and potential impact of the course on the industry and on higher education in the performing arts.

I recently moved to Coventry University, and I continue to work with Nick on the course at RCSSD as an adviser, evaluator and tutor. In addition to this, I am also currently exploring ways for Coventry University's BA Theatre & Professional Practice students to work in collaboration with Coventry-based learning disabled performers as well as looking into new training opportunities.

What was the motivation/ catalyst for developing the course at RCSSD?

I was keen to explore how RCSSD could be made accessible to young people with learning disabilities as I am fully aware of the barriers to higher education. This has always been problematic for me due to the

level of talent, creativity and determination that learning disabled young people have to offer the industry, if given the chance.

Whilst I was at RCSSD, I witnessed the strong track record it has of working with students with learning disabilities, as well as with other types of disabilities such as Asperger's Syndrome, sensory impairment and physical disabilities. There was also a commitment to supporting students who are part of the mental health system. However, I felt there was a need to take the next step and to really embrace the 'widening participation' agenda (widening participation is a government policy to encourage more people from disadvantaged backgrounds to enter higher education).

Why do you think progress is so slow in terms of widening access to higher education for disabled students in the performing arts?

It is challenging in a university environment because outcomes and assessment on degree courses are all valued within specific cultural and social norms. It really depends on which degree, but usually students must meet certain minimum academic requirements before they are considered, (there are of course exceptions to this). In my experience students must have a level of written comprehension that needs to be evidenced before being accepted as often students have to complete a number of lengthy analytical essays throughout the course. This makes it very challenging and often near impossible for someone with a learning disability to even contemplate applying – even for more practice-based performing arts degrees. In my previous and current experience, auditions usually involve a text-based focus that again can alienate and exclude a talented and committed learning-disabled actor from even applying to a course. These 'norms' in terms of degrees are based on a narrow definition of intelligence, creativity and talent, and linguistic skills, that can too easily justify the exclusion of someone with a learning disability.

As a result of these 'norms', there is an assumption in many universities, and amongst the general public, that it is simply not possible for someone with a learning disability to gain a degree and it is not the university's responsibility to make a degree accessible. Within higher education, there is a great deal of research happening that challenges these narrow ideas, however I believe it will take time for this to be reflected in HE institutions as it will require fundamental cultural shifts and challenging of institutionalised assumptions.

This is why we launched the course as part of Central Connects and not within the mainstream academic programme at RCSSD. I believe that it is all of our responsibilities to challenge institutional attitudes that re-enforce the exclusion of learning disabled people from further or higher education (as well as compulsory education), that make huge assumptions about what intelligence is, how we measure it, and ultimately who has the right to access Higher Education.

I also think there is an issue of disabled students not applying for the training courses that are available. Often, as I understand it, they do not believe such courses available are applicable to them, and this can be reinforced by their parents and advisers often out of a sense of trying to protect them. When learning disabled students do enrol on a course, I think part of the theatre-training has to include self-advocacy, disability arts, and the politics of disability so that the students can ultimately challenge the institutionalised discrimination often experienced. This aspect of the current Performance-Making Diploma has been celebrated by the learning disabled students at RCSSD, as it all ties in with agency and ultimately with one's identity.

Have there been any particular challenges in this first year?

I think it's important to be open, honest and to confront issues which might seem tricky – we cannot pretend, for example, that it has always been the norm for students at RCSSD to see students with Down's Syndrome learning and performing in the building. People are curious and this can lead to people interacting in ways which are less than helpful. We need to work with non-disabled students to increase their awareness and understanding of disabled students. At the other extreme, we have students on the course, who do not 'look' as though they have a disability. In some ways this is more challenging for them, as their behaviours and interactions can be easily misinterpreted by others. Again, we need to build trust and understanding among the whole academic community.

Funding for the course is a challenge longer-term, and there is a danger that courses like this remain unusual and sporadic. However I have absolute belief in this course and I think Access All Areas is

committed to making sure that funding enables the course to continue and strengthen. I also believe that a crucial part of this is how we document the course and how we articulate the types of pedagogical (teaching) practice that is being developed, as well as the student's creative outputs. I also think that there is a need to provide more training for staff who facilitate one-off workshops on the course as well as building more bridges across the school with students studying on other courses.

How do you see opportunities for disabled students at RCSSD developing?

This is difficult to answer at the moment, however I hope that the current diploma continues to be offered and strengthens, and that the links to and awareness of the course across RCSSD build over time. It would be wonderful if there were opportunities for some of the learning disabled students from the course to find their way onto one of the many degrees offered at RCSSD in the longer-term. This will require some of those academic/cultural changes outlined above, such as a more flexible approach to minimum academic requirements and different kinds of audition and assessment, but I definitely think it is possible. Saying this however, this year was the first time that a number of the learning disabled diploma students worked collaboratively with a number of degree students from the BA Drama, Applied Theatre Education at RCSSD to devise a theatre in education (TiE) production that toured schools as part of the degree curriculum (a 2nd year Collaborative Outreach unit).

Theatre companies and audiences are increasingly moving away from traditional text proscenium arch based theatre towards something immersive and site specific, visual and physical, which embraces a more post-modern approach and aesthetic to theatre and live performance. The popularity of companies like Punchdrunk, Frantic Assembly and live art festivals is evidence of this and helps to create a profile and an audience for the sort of work which is being explored, learnt and ultimately created and performed by those learning disabled students from the course. As this work becomes more popular and as the profile of learning disabled artists' work increases, I would hope that opportunities begin to open up on degree courses.

Do you think we should be encouraging more learning disabled performers into mainstream television and theatre or focussing on developing learning disabled theatre?

In terms of employment opportunities, I believe that we need companies like Graeae and Access All Areas to exist because there simply isn't integration into the mainstream industry for most disabled performers. These and other disabled-led and sensory-impaired theatre companies, provide disabled performers with a platform, they build audiences and they are committed to pushing the boundaries of how we define theatre, and who it is for. One of the students on this year's Performance Making Diploma had previously worked in mainstream television on a number of soap operas, but eventually decided to turn down roles that were being offered to her. The reason for this was that more and more she was being asked to play very stereotyped roles that just reinforced offensive and negative ideas about people with Down's Syndrome.

I think it's important we work on both fronts, campaigning and pushing for better roles for disabled performers in mainstream productions whilst simultaneously supporting companies like Graeae and Access All Areas that priorities the disabled actor / performer. We need to make sure we include training about the industry in courses so that learning disabled performers can make informed choices about roles and also develop their skills in areas such as directing, producing and indeed the other creative aspects to the industry.

What skills and attributes is RCSSD looking for when selecting students for the course?

We are looking for some experience of theatre, an ability to work with others and a passion for theatre and performance. Our auditions are run as workshops and we are looking to find people who are creative (in whatever way that is manifested) and can respond creatively to different stimuli. It's also important that young people have some experience of the discipline and motivation required to undertake a course like this, so they can maintain their attendance and engagement in the course.

How do you see the future for disability and performing arts?

I feel very positive and excited about the course at RCSSD and the partnership with Access All Areas appears to be working very well. The move of mainstream theatre towards live art and immersive theatre fits very well with the developing aesthetic of theatre created by learning disabled actors and performers.

There seem to be more and more spaces for difference compared to even five years ago. There is clearly a long and strong history of disability arts and academic colleagues are beginning to engage with this more, it feels like there is a 'bit of a buzz' around it – which I hope lasts - I feel very optimistic. There is still a long way to go in terms of higher education but I am confident we will get there in the end.

What advice would you give to a talented disabled young person who wishes to pursue a career in dance/theatre and who is interested in applying to the course? How can they increase their chances of success in their application?

I would say to them try and join a drama group and go and see lots of work. Most of all believe in your own ability and that your 'difference' is a good thing. The performing arts industry is for you, it needs you, it might not know it yet, but it does. Don't be scared to apply to the course, come along and find out more about it and, if you think it's for you or even if you're not sure, apply and come to the workshop audition.