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Case Studies

How Working with a Company of Actors with Physical and/or Sensory Impairments Has Changed a College Curriculum

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The prompt

In 2001, Rose Bruford College moved into purpose-built teaching and performance spaces which made it possible for the college to be more fully inclusive in terms of physical access. The college offers 15 undergraduate degree courses and two postgraduate ones, all in theatre-related arts. With the problems of physical access solved, a review of disability support was undertaken with the aim of embedding accessibility into all college practices. This was further driven by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Code of Practice for the Assurance of Academic Quality and Standards in Higher Education, Section 3, Students with Disabilities (1999) and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act (2001).

A case study was designed to investigate the curriculum changes that might need to be put in place to ensure the inclusivity of academic programmes.

It involved the college working collaboratively with the GRAEAE Theatre Company, a professional company of actors with physical and/or sensory impairments. The aim was to study the BA (Hons) Degree in Acting, whilst recognising this would raise issues with potentially wider applicability across the whole college curriculum. The case study became part of the CADISE (Consortium of Art & Design Institutions in the South East) project *Being Inclusive in the Creative and Performing Arts* <www.bicpa.ac.uk>.

The practice

The case study was undertaken in four stages and the following four precepts from the QAA Code were fore-grounded at the beginning of the work.

Precept 1

Institutions should ensure ... consideration is given to the means of enabling disabled

students' participation in all aspects of the academic and social life of the institution.

Precept 8

Programme specifications should include no unnecessary barriers to access by disabled people.

Precept 10

The delivery of programmes should take into account the needs of disabled people or, where appropriate, be adapted to accommodate their individual requirements.

Precept 13

Assessment and examination policies, practices and procedures should provide disabled students with the same opportunity as their peers to demonstrate the achievement of learning outcomes.

In **Stage One**, GRAEAE Company members read the course documentation and offered amendments. They gave advice on course descriptions that might disadvantage a disabled student. 'A technically sound vocal instrument' was changed to 'wide ranging', 'concentrating on alignment and posture' was changed to 'exploring', and British Sign Language (BSL) was included in phrases that asked a student to 'communicate effectively in writing and through oral and practical work'. They asked tutors to consider how a deaf person or one with a differing speech pattern could access the voice course and what would be an appropriate alternative option to radio performance. All

Rose Bruford degree courses now allow alternative assessments, where appropriate, for disabled students.

In **Stage Two**, the programme team participated in a day workshop led by GRAEAE actors and directors. Staff agreed that the significance of this was that they were being taught inclusive practice by skilled professional performers who themselves had physical or sensory impairments.

In **Stage Three**, students involved in an access programme run by GRAEAE visited the college to learn about theatre-related professions and to offer suggestions on enhancing inclusivity. They suggested that the college prospectus be available on CD, that audio descriptions be available at performances, and that all student front-of-house staff have disability equality training.

In **Stage Four**, GRAEAE students and company members attended the first signed public performance at Rose Bruford. The group included wheelchair users and blind and visually impaired students. Rose Bruford design students gave a live audio description of the set before the show.

Changes in practice

Stage One has led on to a college-wide audit using a 'buddy' system. The tutor involved in this audit helped a second programme director audit his documentation. He then went on to help a colleague audit hers.

Stage Two has led to a second workshop with GRAEAE involving a wider group of tutors. Tutors have visited shows performed by GRAEAE students.

Stage Three has led to further visits enhancing student awareness of disability issues. GRAEAE held an open rehearsal of scenes from Sarah Kane's *Blasted* for Rose Bruford students. This featured a blind actor and another actor who is a wheelchair user and has a differing speech pattern. The theatre was filled to capacity. They also held a rehearsal week on campus with open performances.

Stage Four has led to a signed performance becoming a regular feature of the public performance schedule. The marketing department are producing a prospectus on CD. Programmes will be available in large font and can be made available in Braille. Audio descriptions for performances will be recorded, the theatre loop system is advertised and the front-of-house staff are trained in disability awareness.

The case study has certainly affected practice within the institution. Its ripples might well go on to make waves in the theatre industry.

About the author

Kathy Dacre is Director of Learning, Teaching & Curriculum Development at Rose Bruford College, where she has established and developed degrees in practical performance work. She has taught extensively as

a senior lecturer at Central School of Speech and Drama & Queen Mary Westfield College in London, and Vassar College & New York University in the USA. Her research interests include inclusivity in theatre; reflective rehearsal practice; the politics of processional performance. Her doctoral studies were in Elizabethan and Jacobean Festival Performance.