

## **Case study: Project Maggie's Club Theatre Workshops**

### **NAME OF ORGANISATION**

UCAN Productions (**U**nique **C**reative **A**rts **N**etwork) is a performance arts co-operative run for and by blind and partially sighted young people aged between 7 and 25. The main purpose of the work is to use the creative arts to increase physical and vocal confidence, support mobility and independent living and challenge the general public's perceptions of the capabilities of those with sight loss. Activities include drama, dance, music, creative writing, tactile art and photography for those with low vision.

The primary issues identified by visually impaired young people (1 - UCAN consultation with young people with sight loss, January 2012) include: difficulties in making, and staying, friends with other young people with/without sight loss, the need for peer support, how to communicate through 'sighted' means (e.g. using body language), dealing with 'difficult' and 'awkward' people and disclosing a sight impairment. Our main activities are delivered through specialised arts and performance based workshops, which often culminate in live public performances. Workshops are designed to address the issues identified above and we work to raise aspirations and prove that visual impairment is no barrier to success.

As part of addressing the isolation faced by a lot of visually impaired young people we encourage young sighted volunteers to join UCAN. This benefits the volunteers by giving them a better understanding of what it might be like with sight loss and supports community cohesion. The benefit to the visually impaired young people is that they have the opportunity to make friends to share the same experiences as their sighted peers. UCAN works in Wales and certain areas of England. The organisation has been focussed on developing this area and its 600+ members since 2005.

Many of our original members have now gone on to further/higher education and will soon be transitioning from college/university to work and from living at home to living independently. Previous experience has highlighted the importance of timely and appropriate support to young people with sight loss in their transition to adulthood, primarily because support networks do not transfer with a young person. Our vision is of a world where young people who are blind and partially sighted enjoy the same opportunities and quality of life as people who are sighted.

In 2006 UCAN won, by public vote the National Lottery UK Children's Champion Award beating 460 other projects and organisations to the title.

### **How We Are Run**

UCAN Productions is a co-operative company limited by guarantee. We are a membership organisation with over 600 members across Wales. This ensures that we are led by blind and partially sighted young people, and that they are at the heart of our decision making. We have been delivering programmes since the organisation was founded in 2005. We exist independently, but successfully work in partnership with RNIB Cymru, Disability Arts Cymru and Cardiff University School of Optometry and Vision Sciences.

We have a very successful Young People's Steering Committee who advise and support every aspect of the organisation. Listening to, and working with, the young people and building long and lasting working partnerships with national and regional sight loss organisations has been key to our success.

The support of our highly professional and committed voluntary board of directors has also been invaluable.

The safety and wellbeing of our members and participants is paramount. The organisation operates under robust and regularly monitored company policies and staff training is delivered by external organisations. All staff are required to have a DBS Check and there are thorough safeguarding systems in operation outlined in our safeguarding policy.

## **PROJECT NAME**

UCAN Productions Maggie's Club Theatre Workshops

## **PROJECT DESCRIPTION**

UCAN Productions is based in Cardiff University School of Optometry and Vision Sciences where the organisation has a very successful community engagement partnership.

Maggie's Club was set up in honor of Dr. Margaret (Maggie) Woodhouse OBE, who is based at the School of Optometry and Vision Sciences and whose expertise lies in visual development in children, particularly those with special needs.

(See: <http://sites.cardiff.ac.uk/experts/dr-j-margaret-maggie-woodhouse/>)

<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/optometry-vision-sciences/about-us/working-with-the-community>)

Maggie's Club offered the participants the opportunity to take part in a series of arts activities on a rotation basis. Stations for different art forms (music, drama, circus skills and tactile arts) were set up throughout the building and participants moved on a rotation from one to another or had the option to stay with one art for the whole session. Experienced practitioners and facilitators ran sessions. The sessions ran for 40 minutes to an hour and there was adequate time scheduled for breaks and for the children and young people to socialize and chat. Facilitators made sure that everyone was involved and support was given to make sure everyone felt part of their group.

The engagement with each art form was activity focused, without any sense of judgment regarding what was produced and without any particular outcome required. In this respect each encounter with an art form was exploratory and instrumental, designed to achieve the project aims rather than develop the children's artistic abilities. The emphasis was on play and enjoyment and children and young people had the option to move from activity to activity.

This case study will focus on the theatre workshops.

## **AIMS**

To use theatre:

- to improve social skills
- to develop children and young people's self confidence and self esteem
- to give children and young people the opportunity to make friends
- to create a sense of community where everyone is valued and accepted

- to provide visually impaired children and young people with appropriate role models

## **PARTICIPANTS**

From 2012 to 2015 forty-seven participants aged between 7 and 22 have been involved in Maggie's Club.

There were 26 male and 21 female participants.

All these young people had low vision and additional disabilities.

At least 12% had Down 's Syndrome.

The group was from a wide section of society and on the whole could not be described as deprived. It was evident that all participants had good parental support as they provided transport to and from the activities. Parents/carers also stayed within the building when required. One participant was from minority ethnic background.

## **RECRUITMENT OF PARTICIPANTS**

The Cardiff University School of Optometry and Vision Sciences has a Public Eye Clinic where Dr. Woodhouse runs a special low clinic for children and young people. Clinic staff sent invitations to 201 parents of the young people attending this clinic to attend a series of six drama workshops. Forty-seven respondents returned consent forms and took part in the project.

## **FACILITATORS**

Theatre practitioners and artists, experienced in working with children and young people within community and education settings, ran the project. RNIB CYMRU and UCAN Productions gave all staff/freelance workers visual awareness and child protection training. All safety and protection policies are strictly adhered to at all times.

In addition to experienced practitioners, some of the sessions were run by visually impaired young people aged 16-25 who had been part of UCAN LEAD. UCAN LEAD was a year long programme of workshop leader training, equipping visually impaired young people interested in theatre, with workshop leading skills. This programme of workshop leader training not only challenges the public perception of the capabilities of visually impaired people but also provides powerful role models for visually impaired children and parents/carers of those recently diagnosed with a visual impairment. In addition it provides UCAN with visually impaired workshop leaders and the young people with employment opportunities. Maggie's Club provided an opportunity for the UCAN LEADERS to develop their skills as part of their training as well as subsequently running some of the workshops.

<http://ucanproductions.org/2013/07/ucan-lead-graduation/>

*Bernard Latham:* Artistic Director and Co-founder of UCAN Productions.

Bernard originally trained at the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School where he won the Bristol Old Vic Peter O'Toole Scholarship in the early 70's. He has been a Director and actor for 36 years and has worked

for all the major broadcasters throughout the UK. His television acting roles include nine years as 'MR C' in the Channel 4 soap Hollyoaks produced by Mersey Television. Bernard was also responsible for delivering performance workshops for new 'Hollyoaks' cast members. He was a founder member of the Oxford Film Foundation and a contributor to the Robert Redford film development organisation 'Sundance' Utah. Bernard has always specialised in inspiring and encouraging those who have traditionally not participated in the arts, for example he has devised and directed numerous creative projects for the private and public sector. They include working with NTL to address staff motivation and retention, Admiral Insurance to address group communications and Eversheds, the international law firm which involved a performance project with 150 solicitors. This project won the 2002 Arts and Business Award for 'Best Staff Involvement Project'. In 2003 he was the stage director for 'The Songs for Salone' tour in 2003, where he travelled to Sierra Leone, West Africa and with four other sighted people, returned to the UK with 35 members of the Milton Margai School for the Blind Choir and toured 16 venues throughout the UK. The final concert was held in Westminster Abbey with an audience of 2000. It was this experience which led him and his wife Jane to establish UCAN Productions. Bernard has over the past ten years dedicated his time to developing and piloting confidence building performance activities for visually impaired young people.

*Jane Latham:* Development Director and Co Founder of UCAN Productions.

Jane has been an Arts and Media Development Manager since 1995. Clients include: Bafta Cymru, The Welsh International Film Festival, Pyramid TV Arrgh Animation, BBC Wales, Channel 4, The Sherman Theatre, The Gate Arts Centre, UWIC and the WDA. Jane was one of six event managers working for the Manchester based company LIGHTAGE who won the contract from the Cardiff Bay Development Corporation to organise the launch ceremony for the Welsh Assembly Government. Since becoming co-founder of UCAN Productions Jane was awarded A Winston Churchill Fellowship in 2012 and also became an Honorary Associate of Cardiff University in the same year.

*Dinos Aristidou:* Workshop Tutor and UCAN LEAD developer.

Dinos Aristidou is a playwright, Director and education consultant who specialises in working with educators, communities and young people, both in the UK and internationally. He is a consultant and trainer for the International Baccalaureate and is an Artsmark validator and trainer for Trinity College, London. He was Education, Youth and Participation Manager at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff. He has worked for a number of organisations in the UK, directing large scale work with young people for Birmingham Royal Ballet as artistic director of a new ballet with over 80 young people. As Development Officer for Children and Young People and Creative Learning Programme Manager at the Arts Council of England, South East, he has contributed to creative learning initiatives. He has developed and led site-learning programmes at the SEARCH museum in Gosport and the American Museum of Natural History, New York. In 2012 he was commissioned to write a play as part of the 2012 Cultural Olympiad for the South East. He is at present working on a commissioned play for production in spring 2015 and is running a two-year programme developing young writers aged 16-25. He is a part of the artistic team and a board member of the International Schools Theatre Association (ISTA) and Theatre Versus Oppression. He developed and ran UCAN LEAD, a workshop leader training programme and is currently developing UCAN DIRECT.

*Alys Byrne:* Director and Workshop Tutor.

Trained at Rubicon Dance School and University of Surrey, Roehampton. Alys has worked extensively as a Director and Workshop Tutor for numerous arts organisations including Acting Out Cardiff, Sherman Theatre, Hijinx Theatre Company, Nidus Theatre Arts, Fusion Drugs/Alcohol Service and The Yellow Project, Bridgend and Sherman Sherbets. She is also a member of the Odyssey Theatre

company. Alys began working with UCAN Productions in 2006 and since then has successfully directed numerous projects.

*Charlotte Neville:* Workshop Tutor and Stage Designer.

Charlotte trained as a set designer at the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama and has worked with UCAN for over 8 years. As well as designing all the UCAN Productions stage sets and costumes, Charlotte runs creative tactile arts workshops.

*Alex Rees:* Workshop Tutor.

Alex is an experienced composer, producer and tutor with a Masters Degree (Distinction) in Music Engineering and Productions. Alex specialist area is encouraging those with no experience to create their own compositions, he also runs his own company Visible Music.

*Dan Rochford:* Workshop Tutor.

Dan is a professional Actor and Musician, he trained through the medium of Welsh at Trinity College, Carmarthen when he took a degree in Theatre, Media and Music. Dan's specialist area is drumming and percussion which he teaches to grade 8. Dan is also a volunteer for RNIB Cymru and has been working with UCAN for 8 years.

In addition to the key staff UCAN Productions employs additional freelance arts practitioners to deliver workshops in Circus Skills, Body Percussion and Photography for those with low vision.

## **PARTNERS/FUNDERS**

The partnership between Cardiff University School of Optometry and Vision Sciences and UCAN Productions is unique and has been key in the success of this project. It not only benefits the participants but also the volunteers, many of whom are either professionals within the sight loss sector or students in Optometry.

The funding has come from the Wales Council for Voluntary Actions WCVA (see <http://www.wcva.org.uk/>) which has given UCAN the opportunity to support the volunteers with Child Protection and Visual Awareness Training, pay for facilitators, materials and volunteer expenses. Cardiff University School of Optometry and Vision Sciences supplied the venue.

## **OUTCOMES**

*For the participants*

The participants:

- demonstrated an increase in their level of confidence and self esteem
- developed new arts
- developed their social skills, working as a team and making new friends
- worked comfortably with different people

*For the facilitators*

- The facilitators learnt more about working with visually impaired young people with additional disabilities (prior to this UCAN's focus had been on main stream young people)
- UCAN LEADERS had an opportunity to develop their workshop leading skills and gained

confidence in workshop leading

#### *Other*

- A powerful by product of all these activities was the opportunity for parents - they got to meet on a regular basis and share their concerns and experiences. Although we did not intend to do a parents support group it has 'organically' evolved.

## **EVALUATION METHODS**

The Arad Research 'Arts Participation Toolkit for Projects' was used to guide our evaluation processes (See Appendix 1).

UCAN also used a questionnaire, which is available in the national report, published in the reports' section of the web-site.

## **EVIDENCE**

### Quotes:

*"As volunteers, we have been privileged to watch the young people develop in so many ways. Some started out shy, not wanting to join in or interact. Within a few weeks, they have blossomed and begun to initiate activities themselves. Others found mixing difficult, and didn't know how to take turns or share. They now appreciate others, and are willing to wait their turn. All of the members of Maggie's Club have learned skills, be it crafts, imitating sounds, or moving to music, and all have enormous fun in physical activities."* Dr Margaret Woodhouse OBE. School of Optometry & Vision Sciences

### *Mrs Leverton (Parent)*

My son, who has Downs Syndrome has been going to Maggie's Club since it started. He enjoys his Saturday afternoons greatly and has truly benefited from the care and support (and fun!) that he has received. He always looks forward to going and we would not want it to stop. It offers support to the young people and work and experience to the supporters.  
Long live Maggies Club!

### *Mrs Julia Godin (Parent)*

Maggie's Club is always eagerly anticipated by our 12 year old daughter. She has autism, learning disabilities, is partially deaf too but Maggie's Club staff make her feel valued special and completely included. Maggie's Club gives our daughter the space to be herself, to be valued for who she is, plus fun and friendship with other young people. It has given her confidence to be more independent and to participate as an equal. Maggie's Club activities use venues that are valued within the community so the young people actively experience feeling part of the wider community not excluded by being shut away in inferior spaces. Our daughter would miss Maggie's Club hugely if it were to stop. She has few activities where she feels equal. We thank UCAN staff and volunteers most sincerely for giving so much joy to young people who don't normally experience the range of activities, in other settings, that this organisation puts on.

### *Helen Campbell (Parent)*

Maggie's Club has been a fabulous experience for our son - we cannot praise it highly enough. Our

opinion of it can be summed up by the fact that any dates we are given for it we add to our family calendar and base any other activities around that. Because of the delays in our son's development he is often nervous in new situations and it has been lovely to see his confidence build. We have really noticed how he is ready to participate as soon as he arrives and is happy to 'perform' in front of others. He also talks about it and often asks when the next one is. We are also very grateful for the patience of the Maggie's Club and UCAN productions staff and volunteers. Rory's opinion 'I like it because I do good things there. I particularly like hoola hooping and making music'.

*Marcus McClean (Parent)*

There is only one thing I can say. We try to let Poppy know at the last minute when Maggie's Club is because she gets so excited that it is all she talks about. She loves the friends she has made and now is not shy about getting up in front of people.

*Eleanor, age 15:* "The main thing I have gained from UCAN is confidence – to accept my visual impairment and not feel like I have to hide it or worry about it because I've done so much despite my visual impairment."

*Megan, age 22, UCAN LEADER:* "I've had the experience of acting and recording through UCAN but it's opened up so many more options. With the experience you have in UCAN you're able to do anything you want to do. You don't need to do UCAN just to do drama; you could come to UCAN and become a lawyer. Just because it's given you that extra edge and that confidence to believe in what you want to do."

*Lloyd, Junior Chairman, 22* "UCAN has had a huge impact on my life, both personally and professionally. The experiences I've had through UCAN have given me an optimism and self-esteem that would have not developed in the same way had I not been a member. They have also given me that important sense of drive and ambition - not, I hope, in the ruthless and selfish sense, but more in the spirit and belief that there is a positive future out there for every individual to go and grab for themselves. Whilst visual impairment is the one similarity that brings everyone together at UCAN, we whole-heartedly reject the idea that it actually *defines* anyone. We see past the disability, and we exist to show others how to do the same."

*Jake, age 19, UCAN LEADER:* "It's nice to be around other visually impaired people, because I find it's nice to be around people who you have a connection like that with because you can just laugh about it – you don't feel different."

*Mared, age 20, UCAN LEADER:* "What amazes me is the amount of time we actually spend talking about our visual impairment to each other. It's hardly ever mentioned – not because we don't like to talk about it just because we don't find it necessary to talk about it and we get on with each other as friends despite anything anyway that you are automatically in sync with one another because you have that impairment. You find it easy to get along because there's someone there that understands you."

*Annie, parent of UCAN member:* "As the parent of a VI child I can tell you that there is very very little available which not only provides opportunities but also inclusion, and that is why we feel so grateful for UCAN and the outstanding hard work they have put into giving our children opportunities and experiences which are otherwise unavailable to them."

*Lucy, parent of UCAN member:* "That first session saw Sophie being welcomed by a beautiful group of

young people, quite different from how I thought UCAN would be, I am afraid that even with a child with VI I had my preconceptions. Sophie was fascinated by the activities and for the first time I saw that her Visual Impairment wouldn't mean she was unable to do the things she enjoyed and the sense of YOU CAN was obvious."

*Julia, parent of UCAN member: "I see UCAN as a group that has allowed my child to grow in a way that is not hindered by other people's perceptions, in an environment that is encouraging and non judgmental, that has allowed her to be herself, and has let her see the endless opportunities that are available to her in the future. It has provided a lifeline for us both and it feels like we are now part of a big extended family."*

## **THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS**

*Art is not merely contemplation, it is also action, and all action changes the world, at least a little. (Kushner, T. 2001)*

### **Transformation**

The UCAN Maggie's Club experience takes a holistic approach to giving visually impaired young people an opportunity to engage with the arts and develop their skills. It is based on practical activity with the assumption that:

*The "hands on" experience will lead to stronger motivation and more permanent leaning than the experience that is purely abstract (Courtney, R. 1982)*

For many young people this has a developmental impact, both in terms of their engagement with the arts and in the development of their personal and social skills. Confidence building and learning to overcome shyness are key features of this experience. The UCAN experience engages children and young people emotionally, physically and intellectually.

*Educational and developmental psychology distinguishes between three distinct but interconnected levels of learning self-expression: psycho-motoric, affective and cognitive.' (Hilton 1987)*

Hilton's levels or learning self-expression provide a guideline for the types of drama exercises and activities that are employed to achieve UCAN's aim of developing children and young people's personal skills:

- *psycho-motoric* - these are physical activities involving movement, gesture and voice. They often deal with energy and are focused on the body and on physical activity.
- *Affective* - these are activities designed to engage the children and young people emotionally with material and are focused on giving them a sense of well being
- *Cognitive* - these are drama games and problem solving exercises which engage young people's minds and their creativity

In addition to these, are ensemble exercises, exercises which are designed to develop a healthy group dynamic and develop children and young people's social skills. They can be clustered into exercises that focus on:



- *physical contact* - these exercises and activities involve some sort of contact and are developed with a strong emphasis on safety and on participants' comfort.
- *sharing ideas* - these exercises and activities involve children and young people having to solve some sort of problem and sharing perspectives and ideas. These also often require negotiation and sensitivity regarding responding to others' contribution.
- *Collaboration* - these exercises and activities involve children and young people working together with a common aim to create something together.

The participants work in a creative atmosphere, working consistently with imagination and with a sense of play. In Creative teaching, teaching creativity and creative learning (2001) Lucas provides a list that gives guidelines regarding the development of young people's creativity. This list, though directed at schools, describes UCAN's approach and expectations regarding all its events and experiences. Some of the aspects that, according to Lucas, encourage creativity and which are relevant to UCAN are:

- *Being respectful rather than dismissive*
- *Encouraging active not passive learning*
- *Supporting individual interests rather than standardised curriculums*
- *Engaging many learning styles not one*
- *Encouraging and exploring emotional responses*
- *Posing questions not statements*
- *Being open-ended rather than closing-down*
- *Being known as surprising rather than predictable*
- *Offering many patterns rather than a standardised model*
- *Moving the 'classroom' to varied environments*
- *Recognising the multiple intelligences*
- *Including tactile and experience-based activity*
- *Stimulating social as well as private learning*

The content of Maggie's Club is focused around the concept of play. This is used to create the right sort of atmosphere and also as a form of engagement for the young people. It is celebratory in feel and enjoyable in action. Furthermore play is a key element for success because it encourages risk taking with the safe knowledge that there are not any consequences and allows for a joyful interaction not only with others but also with the world. This sentiment is echoed by Lepage who in Robert Lepage, Connecting Flights states that '*For me it's very important to restore the notion of playing to the game of theatre*' (Charest 1995). The spirit of play is the foundation on which Maggie's Club rests because it is also through play that the close ties between the young people are created.

Transformation, creation and communion are three areas that lie at the heart of theatre. Theatre is essentially a process of transformation, of idea into action, of one person into another, of space into place. At its heart is the creation of the imagined through a communion of bodies, minds, spirits and energies that conjure up new worlds before our eyes. The transformative process in education is also often described using mystic or what is referred to as new age vocabulary: spirit, miracle, magic and synergy. This spiritual rhetoric within the discourse of education is addressed by Neelands in his article of 2004, in which he examines the concept of the 'miracle' in education. He recognises that the use of terms such as 'miraculous' and 'transformative' might be problematic.

*The problem then, is to find ways of theorising the possibility of personal and social changes and transformations through drama experiences in ways that go beyond advocacy and rhetoric and which acknowledge the relativism of context.*

He goes on, however, to provide some indication of how we can make sense of such mystic terms by focusing on human potential in a pedagogic context as being part of the 'project of identity:'

*...in a pedagogic context that stresses 'becoming', that views human potentiality as a project rather than as an essentialised and contained given, 'miracles' are not the exception but the rule' (2004)*

This concept of identity being a 'project of becoming' is particularly pertinent for young people with visual impairments.

### **Community and Belonging**

Creating a community and a space where young people and children feel comfortable, safe and valued is key to the development of the child/young person. A lot of thought and care is taken to create the right conditions and atmosphere which will allow the participants to play, develop and flourish. This is particularly important for visually impaired children or young people who may find themselves in situations where they feel excluded. Making them feel part of a 'we' guides the choice for most of the theatre activities. This approach, this practice of *WE*, goes beyond the theatre exercises. It is one of the primary principles of UCAN, and is the methodology that underpins activity provided by the organisation and what it means to work, be part of or engage with the organisation.

*The WE story defines a human being in a specific way; it says we are our central selves seeking to contribute, naturally engaged, forever in a dance with each other. It points to relationships rather than to individuals, to communication patterns, gestures and movement rather than to discrete objects and identities. (Zander and Zander 2000).*

Theatre exercises, activities and techniques are used by UCAN within therapeutic, community and education contexts to form a healthy group before any work or artistic endeavor is started. Artist facilitators begin with a basic belief in the '*alchemy of synergy*' (Robinson 2008). This synergy results in a connected, cohesive group, made up of diverse individuals. This group, however, has greater capabilities and capacity than the sum of its component parts. In this respect it is a model for increased productivity.

In the context of Maggie's Club, the theatre exercises and activities focus on this collaboration, synergy and sense of community. There is a strong belief in the value that comes from the collaboration of diverse young people who have a visual impairment in common. Creating a community and a sense of belonging is the desired outcome so this, rather than an artistic result or product, becomes the focus for the facilitators. In this respect theatre is valued for its instrumental value (being used as an instrument or tool for cohesion and belonging) rather than for its intrinsic value, as art. Furthermore it is this very connection between the participants, working coherently as one, which offers them the opportunity to develop and enhance their social and personal skills. The broader application of this methodology is also socio-political, aspiring to give the young people and their parents/carers a sense of belonging, creating community cohesion between young people who may feel excluded.

*...we have distinguished a new entity that personifies the 'togetherness' of you and me and others. This entity, the WE, can be found among any two people, in any community or organisation, and it can be thought of, in poetic terms, as a melody running through the people of the earth...' (Zander and Zander 2000).*

In order to form a cohesive group which works and plays together, activities, exercises and approaches that establish complicité on a physical, emotional and cognitive basis, are employed by the artist facilitators. Participants work individually, in pairs, small groups and as a whole group. This is important for the creation of a sense of safety so that no one ever feels they are being judged or assessed. It is important in the creation of community and belonging that everyone feels they are working as one so there is no showing or sharing of work at Maggie's Club. It gives each young person a sense of belonging to a group of similar young people while simultaneously allowing them to retain their individual identity. This is key to UCAN's broader objective; the recognition that each individual can be who they are and yet belong, be accepted and find a home in a UCAN community, that not only recognises and accepts them, but encourages the diversity of their approaches and identities.

*Culture has more to do with community than collectivity. A community struggles for its own reality as a community: the people in it try to retain their individuality...community is the working with one another by a multitude of persons. (Courtney 1982).*

People with a visual impairment may often be viewed or feel they are being viewed as an 'other.' Through this identification of what is 'other' or 'alien', society establishes a sense of who belongs and who doesn't. This can also be observed in the ways young people form friendship groups, gangs or cliques.

*The term 'alterity' can be used to express the 'otherness' of people or values beyond the cultural horizon of self. The demarcation line between identity and alterity is the battlefield of social identity. The most important contour on the cultural map is the division between 'us' and 'them', for this defines those we must defend and those we must attack. (Pearce, R. 2001).*

The practice of WE is important in making sure that young people do not see themselves as 'other' but perceive themselves as part of an 'us' – meeting, working and being with others all united through play and theatre. This is true collaboration- the recognition that difference brings richness while simultaneously enjoying being part of a group. It is also empowering for young people to recognise that they don't need to feel 'other' or conform to a particular profile to fit in; they can be themselves or a particular aspect of themselves, and be accepted and part of the 'us'. In this way the:

*practice of the WE gives us a method for reclaiming 'the Other' as one of us (Zander and Zander 2000).*

The dissolution of these 'demarcation lines' builds confidence and resilience in the young people. Maggie's Club also created an atmosphere where everyone felt they were learning together. Everyone begins on a level playing field as there aren't any auditions or any sort of selection process. This makes learning

*an interactive process in which people learn from each other...It is surely in the nature of human cultures to form such communities of mutual learners. (Bruner 1996).*

The dual process of using theatre to transform a feeling of *otherness* into a sense of belonging also comes with the recognition that, through theatre, we are all in the same 'tribe' (Robinson 2009). This process is described by Robinson (2009) as the *tribal clustering of a tribe of creative individuals'*. This was particularly evident with the UCAN LEADERS and it led to '*explosive innovation and growth*' and provided '*inspiration and provocation to raise the bar*' Robinson (2009). The raising of the bar and the raising of aspiration happens when UCAN develops the WE story through the use of theatre and

theatrical play.

### **Self Esteem**

Maggie's Club, therefore, provided a safe domain, a space where 'real self' can emerge. This sense of 'being yourself' and being accepted as yourself is what builds self esteem and self-confidence. This sense of feeling safe seems to be partly due to two elements; Maggie's Club is a liberating time outside of 'real life' where young people and children feel free of the labels of their regular lives and it is also a chance for them to operate in a world where they have the choice regarding how they are to be read and received by others. Having the space, freedom and comfort to express self cannot be underestimated in developing these conditions for the discovery of self. In a world where for many of these young people there are barriers and obstacles, UCAN provides the license or young people and children to collaboratively set their own coordinates and find their own way and their own sense of identity through theatrical play, guided both by professionals, UCAN LEADERS and other participants.

UCAN takes an approach that Drennan (2002) describes as based '*on the tenet that human diversity is intrinsically valuable.*' The diversity of UCAN's approaches of theatre making and theatre play not only develop, but indeed demand a meaningful interplay between individuals and groups. Ultimately the success of UCAN's work is dependent on the successful interplay through theatre between different identities.

### **Imagination**

One of the most powerful effects of creativity is the application of the imagination and the development of the 'ability to imagine'. It is this quality that leads to empowerment through creativity. This ability is a key feature of aspiration . It gives young people the capacity to imagine other realities and other possible worlds and offers them, through theatre, the tools and the skills not only to imagine, but also to create these worlds.

*...the first task in teaching for creativity in any field is to encourage young people to believe in their creative potential, to engage their sense of possibility and to give them the confidence to try.'* (National Advisory Committee on Creativity, Culture and Education 2001).

It is through the use of theatrical exercises and approaches which are completely inclusive and allow all participants to engage that UCAN provides a vision not of how the world is but rarer of how the world *ought* to be. UCAN believes in the significant roles that theatre can play in the lives of young people; the presentation of possibility, the sort of possibility which is aspirational and empowering offering young people the possibility not only to imagine a different world but also develop their capacity to make a world which challenges prejudice and discrimination.

*In acting 'differently', in acting 'as-if' the world was otherwise, students may be encouraged to discover that at personal, local, national and inter-national levels they are free to negotiate, translate and therefore transform the problem of identities and the problem of the representation of identities in what Bhabha calls a "continuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference."* (Neelands 2004).

For young people who often feel disempowered and dispirited, having a place within UCAN is empowering and affirming. It is of great significance to them because the young person becomes an agent of their own transformation.

In The Element (2009), Robinson writes that *'Through imagination, we not only bring to mind things that we have experienced but things that we have never experienced'* (2009). It is the creation and exploration of new worlds based on existing worlds that raise aspiration by making anything imaginable a possibility. Participants leave a UCAN event believing in the possibility of transformation and equipped with the tools to make these transformations happen. UCAN echoes the belief that

*it's not what happens to us that determines our lives- it's what we make of what happens'* (Robinson 2009).

Maggie's Club is one such 'happening' that can be a launch pad to raise young people's aspirations and sense of what they are capable of achieving. UCAN opens doors and signposts pathways into a future determined and created by young people. It fulfils Bruner's idea that learning

*should not only take us somewhere; it should allow us later to go further more easily.'*(1977).

### **Facilitating**

*"Effective [facilitators] must combine the skill of dramaturg, director, improvisational actor, drama therapist, political philosopher, rhetorician, talk show host and stand-up comic* (Sullivan 2004).

Though we refer to a process of creating a sense of belonging through theatre activity, as has been indicated above, there is a multiplicity of approaches and processes that characterise what happens at Maggie's Club. The UCAN artist facilitators work in collaboration with visually impaired young people who have been trained as workshop leaders through the UCAN LEAD initiative. They offer a wide scope of structured theatre exercises and activities that build the group dynamic. UCAN does not require its artist facilitators or its UCAN LEADERS to adopt a specific theatrical process. The UCAN artist facilitators, having been recruited after thorough safeguarding processes have been conducted are characterised by the way they work with visually impaired young people and children, their understanding and embodiment of the values and mission of the organisation, and their belief in the power and importance of collaborative working. UCAN only asks that *'one dream the same dream with another'* the essence of collaboration as described by Cruz in Trans-global readings, Crossing theatrical boundaries (2003). This is a key element in the recruitment of UCAN facilitators; that as practicing artists they each have their own processes but, more importantly, that they are able to generate processes that are appropriate, rich and meaningful for the young people and children they are working with. Each artist is also required to be *'not only a communicator but a model'* (Bruner 1977) that communicates an inclusive approach and a rigorous methodology. The most important aspect of any of UCAN's events is that they are developed around the needs, passions and approaches of the individuals. As Robinson (2009) explains:

*Great teachers have always understood that their real role is not to teach subjects but to teach students.*

### **Passion**

Motivation and a feeling of empowerment occur when you find yourself doing the things that you love, that you are passionate about. It is at this moment that you feel you are being your true self and you are filled with an energy that drives you into the future. It is this feature that forms the basis of Robinson's book The Element (2009). Robinson's work gives us insights that we can apply to the work of UCAN and the impact its work has on young people and their passion for theatre. Robinson

recognises that one of the keys to effective engagement lies in putting young people:

*'in an environment where they want to learn and where they can naturally discover their true passions.'* UCAN helps young people to discover, identify or apply this passion and provides them with an opportunity to engage and be in their element.

*Being in your element, having that experience of flow, is empowering because it's a way of unifying our energies. It's a way of feeling deeply connected with our own sense of identity...* (Robinson 2009).

In this respect, for some young people, Maggie's Club provides the start of a journey – a journey both into the world of theatre and also into the world of UCAN. Robinson defines the Element as being the *'meeting point between natural aptitude and personal passion.'* In the context of UCAN, this is young people who have a passion and an aptitude for theatre and for play. It's important to note here that we are not talking about talent. Even though UCAN provides great opportunities and is of great benefit to young people who are talented and have developed high-level theatrical skills, there are no requirements regarding the skill level of a participant. Enthusiasm, passion and curiosity are the prerequisites if there are any. What many participants enjoy most about UCAN is the uninterrupted flow of theatre-making activity and play. Because of the careful attention that has been paid by UCAN to the quality of the experience, accomplishment is felt and understood on a personal level by the young people rather than measured and expressed by an external accrediting body. Working in their element immediately places the participant in the 'flow' of the present and engages them fully, a sense that Robinson describes this as being in the 'zone'.

*To be in the zone is to be at the heart of the Element...We live in the moment. We become lost in the experience and perform at our peak'* (2008).

The UCAN facilitators are all practitioners with a passion for learning and a belief in the benefits that the arts can have on learning, well being and on personal and social development. When they are working with young people, these practitioners are usually also in *their* element and they model and transmit their artistic practices through their passion and enthusiasm. This transmission is mutual for the artistic staff also enter into *'the zone'* when there is genuine synergy with the participants and when the learning and exploration is authentically collaborative for what *'connects a tribe is a common commitment to the thing they feel born to do.'* (Robinson 2008). For both the young people and the artists, working with likeminded people who share their passion is one of the joys and part of the satisfaction of being at a UCAN event.

This shared passion is aspirational. It is important for the young people and children to have appropriate role models, others like themselves who have overcome barriers and have claimed their place in the world. This is what makes UCAN LEAD a particularly important part of UCAN and of Maggie's Club. It not only leads to great satisfaction in the work but also helps young people to meet the challenges of life and helps them to make the most of themselves and more importantly to strive for what would otherwise be the impossible.

*for most people, a primary component of being in their Element is connecting with other people who share their passion and a desire to make the most of themselves through it.* (Robinson 2009).

## **CONSIDERATIONS FOR VISION**

Examining Maggie's Club and its success, especially for children and young people new to theatre, new to UCAN and new to working with other visually impaired children and young people, the following strands can be identified which can provide some touchstones for the VISION project:

- **Theatre as Instrumental**

Thinking of theatre as an instrument or a tool to achieve the project's aim is important. The programme is not designed to develop young theater makers so strategies need to be developed looking at how to most effectively use the theatre form to fulfill these aims.

- **Creative Play and Giving Instructions**

Learning and developing through creative play is important. Theatre games and exercises have great value in engaging young people and there is a wide repertoire of games for energising, creating ensemble, focusing, relaxing. Some games need to be adapted imaginatively for visually impaired learners and language used to convey instructions is key.

- **Choice**

Giving young people choice regarding how they want to be involved and what they wanted to focus on was a significant part of Maggie's Club. This is a good way to begin as it gives young people a sense of empowerment and a feeling of safety as working outside of your comfort zone can be frightening.

- **Inclusive**

All activities should be inclusive and exercises and activities need to be adapted to make sure that they are within every young person's ability. Strategies must be developed to ensure that any young person who does not seem engaged can be supported and helped to find their way into the work.

- **Different Types of Games and Activities**

Attention must be given to structuring the experience carefully for different types of learners. There should be exercises that focus on:

- The physical and vocal
- The emotional
- The cognitive
- Focus and concentration
- Skills
- Working together
- Socialising
- Creativity

- **Community and Belonging**

Feeling part of a community is essential. A lot of time should be focused on group building and ensemble activities before any work is started. If a participant does not feel safe or comfortable it is impossible to work or pay attention to the work. This phase of the work should continue until the facilitators feel that ALL participants are engaged and comfortable.

- **Schedule and Planning**

Scheduling is very important, both in terms of the length of each individual session and in terms of the project as a whole. It is difficult to concentrate for long lengths of time and the pace needs to be relaxed otherwise young people feel tense and under pressure. There should be long breaks to allow for Socialising, talking and time and activities designed for the development of friendships.

- **Confident, Experienced Facilitators and Support**

Facilitators should be experienced theatre practitioners and artists, experienced in working with children and young people within community and education settings. They should all have visual awareness and child protection training. The project must ensure that all safety and protection policies are followed and strictly adhered to at all times. Every session should have at least two facilitators, one leading and the other observing/supporting. This gives the option of one to one work if any particular young person is stuck or finding the work too challenging. It is often difficult for the leader to 'catch' this when they are dealing with the whole group.

- **The Art of Possibility**

Participants should feel that this is the beginning of the journey and that there are possibilities beyond the project. Each organisation should have systems in place to give the participants a sense of how they can continue to develop and be involved in the future. This develops a sense of aspiration and possibility.

- **Atmosphere and Joy**

There should be a sense of joy and celebration in the work and a comfortable atmosphere. Facilitators and organisers need to model this and need to develop a programme that allows this to happen.

**Note 1** – UCAN undertook a recorded audio consultation of 12 visually impaired young people from UCAN Productions' Steering Committee. The consultation was to identify primary concerns within the UCAN membership in January 2012.



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