Best Practices and Institutional Models

Round table with Liv Mendelsohn (ReelAbilities), Cindy Schwartz (Les Muses), Dan Ten Veen (Spectrum Productions)
October 22, 2019, in Tiohtià:ke/Montreal (Quebec, Canada)

This conference is part of *Interrogating Access*, a series of talks and workshops on accessibility in art and media production developed by OBORO and Spectrum Productions with the support of the Canada Council for the Arts. OBORO and Spectrum Productions acknowledge that their activities take place in Tiohtià:ke, an unceded Kanien'kehá:ka territory.

(Beginning of transcription)

Liv Mendelsohn

While Dan helps me with the tech, I just want to say a big thank you again. It's been a pleasure to be able to connect with Dan over the years in the world of film. And a big thank you to Oboro for welcoming and hosting me. I look forward to collaboration with everyone, and some really exciting Montreal-Toronto collaboration to come.

I'm going to start here and tell you a little bit about the organization I work for. We are going into our fifth year at ReelAbilities Toronto. We are a film

festival that showcases Deaf and disability cultures through film. We also now include comedy, dance and a very large education program which brings short films about equity, empathy and inclusion to classrooms in English and French across Canada. So far, that program has reached 36 school boards across the country. It's been a nice outgrowth of our festival.

The festival itself showcases the work of filmmakers with lived experience of disability, Deaf filmmakers, and filmmakers with lived experience of mental health [disability]. We have a student film component and field trips for a week. The festival itself lasts for ten days at the end of May and the beginning of June, in Toronto. This past year, we had 15,000 people in attendance, so it's growing.

We have, throughout the year, events and lecture series. Right now, we have Angelo Moretto, who is a professor of Cinema Studies, doing a lecture series called *Disability on Film*, which looks at tropes in film around disability.

Those are some of the events we have. I'm going to talk a little bit about our access practices and some of the things we've learned in the past five years.

These are the principles that guide us. We're going to dig into some details of how we try to be accessible, but these are the principles that undergird all of that. Some of you, maybe all of you will be familiar with "Nothing about us, without us," which is a sort of slogan that came from the Disability Rights movement in the United States in the 1970s.

It refers to the fact that there shouldn't be any policies, programs, anything to do with supporting or enabling people that doesn't come from that group themselves, ourselves. That is true of artists, it's true of community audiences, and it's also true of staff who are going through training, to learn to become more accessible. I think that principle is at the heart and soul of what we do in creating community spaces.

Collaboration: Accessibility is a shared responsibility. It's not about an organization having one person who is the accessibility person. It doesn't work very well that way. It has to be something everyone connects with, and understands as part of their core mission. There may be somebody

who's more responsible than somebody else in reaching out to particular audiences, or particular staff, or training people, but it has to be something that's shared across any organization.

Acting with intention: When we're not intentionally inclusive, we may be unintentionally exclusive. I think that's really important, because a lot of the barriers that people face are not barriers that were intended as such. It's not that an organization sat around, and decided: "Well, we don't want this group of people coming." That's not usually how it plays out. It's the unintended, the things we didn't think through, the things we didn't rethink, that make, often the most painful barriers.

No new barriers: Once we're really thinking about barriers, whenever we do something new—a new season, a new program, whatever it is that we're doing—we want to make sure that we're not adding to barriers, and creating new barriers.

Accessibility, sometimes people see as an "I have to," and I would say it's an amazing creative opportunity. It's an opportunity to rethink what you're doing, how you've always done it, it's an opportunity for disruption, it's an opportunity to hear from new voices and to integrate new ideas, so actually, I think in the arts world, accessibility is very exciting.

And it's a process, not a checklist. So, you may hear from us some suggestions and some ideas of ways to start thinking, or to continue thinking about how to be more accessible. There are things that may feel like "Do this, don't do that," but ultimately, it's an ongoing process. Seldom will any organization say: "We're completely accessible." That doesn't really mean anything, because there's such a diversity of needs and such a diversity of ways to access arts, that it's really more of a process. It's really more about how you work, rather than exactly what you do.

And finally, the other guiding principle: I think organizations often think about audiences—how do we extend our audience, expand our audience, and include new people in the work we're doing? But accessibility is also about artists. It's also about who's on stage and who's speaking, and it's about the organization. So I'll talk a little more about that, too.

I'm not going to go deep into marketing and design—it sounds like it's

something you're going to be talking about in another session anyway. There are certain things you can do to make your marketing more accessible. But ultimately, I think the most important thing you can do on your marketing, and on the things you're doing to reach out, is to note that you're committed to accessibility, and to include ways for people to get in touch with you. So, I'm not going to go through individual pieces here, although I'm sure the slides will be made available to you.

This is where I'll talk a little bit more about outreach. So, when we're producing art, when we're curating, when we're creating art, we're never doing it in a vacuum anyway. But it's really important, when you're starting to think about access and who isn't able to engage with the work that you're doing yet, to think about collaborative ways to include them, and not just in chairs in the audience, but to really think about how they're experiencing your work, how they could be giving you new ideas, and we're really big on community advisories and partnerships.

We partner explicitly with other film organizations, like in Toronto, we partner with Hot Docs, Toronto International Film Festival, Inside Out LGBTQ+ Film Festival—very big film-focused organizations—but also every screening we do is co-partnered with a disability service organization: Autism Ontario, Down Syndrome Association of Toronto. Part of what we're doing is we're trying to create an audience that will include members of those constituencies so, over time, they'll actually become one constituency. They'll get to know each other, they'll get to meet at industry events, and they'll get to connect. So every event is intentionally brought together.

One of the other things that we do around outreach, specifically to Deaf communities, is to put together video logs (vlogs). We have found that print material is not necessarily the most helpful way to reach out to Deaf communities. That's something specifically that I want to highlight: There are a lot of Deaf-run organizations that can help you connect with and reach out to Deaf communities in ASL or LSQ, and creating video logs is really important.

Some of these other pieces are more about some of the specifics: Captioning your videos, using plain language. I won't go into those too much.

Some of our practices: Every screening is a relaxed screening environment. Can you give me an indication in the audience if you're familiar with relaxed performances or relaxed screenings? Okay, great. I'll go into it a little bit.

They're similar to sensory-friendly screenings, of which you may have heard, but basically, the stiff, formal rules that often constrain an audience, about coming and going, about making noise, those are gone, and there are explicitly said so be gone. Someone will say at the beginning of the screening: "This is a relaxed screening. You're welcome to come and go as you please. You're welcome to make noise or move your body if you need to. The lights will be a little bit dim but not completely off, and the sound will be just a little lower than you might ordinarily find in a screening environment." That's really helpful for people with all sorts of needs, but I think it also creates a different audience community, and especially when we make it explicit that we're doing this with intention.

We use social stories. They're basically ways of preparing audiences, visually and with text, for what's going to be happening, so that you don't have to wonder: "At this event that I'm going to, what is it going to feel like, look like, sound like, and what's my role in the event?" so really laying that all out for somebody.

For our organization, and it's going to be different for every organization, we try to make sure we have a venue, or venues, that are accessible to wheelchair users, and not just the 2 or 4 seats that most theatres have. I don't know if this the case in Montreal, but in Toronto, most theatres built after a certain point with our building code are required to have 2 or 4 seats. They're usually right at the front or right at the back, and if you want to come with six of your friends to see a movie, you're not sitting with them.

So we try to find venues where you can sit with the people that you want to sit with, where you can come to something based on your interests, not your abilities, so it's not cordoned off as "This is the disability seating area," and that we have all-gender accessible washrooms, and for us, a minimum of 20 seats is our guideline.

Accessible ticketing: How do people come? How do they buy tickets? Is that something that someone who's Deaf can do easily, that someone who's blind can do easily, that someone who has an intellectual disability can

navigate easily? We think automatically: "Oh, we'll just put it on Eventbrite." There's a number of mechanisms that we tend to use that may not be that accessible.

Another big one is companion seating, and free seats for companions. We don't want to charge someone twice to attend an event. So if someone needs a support person, or a companion to sit with them, we don't want to charge them for two tickets, when anybody else would be able to pay only for one ticket.

All of our films are captioned. It's similar to subtitles, they have the text at the bottom. It's great for people for whom English or French isn't their first language. It's great for lots of folks: Deaf folks, folks with learning disabilities.

And all of our films have audio description, which someone here is specializing in, which is amazing. Audio description is a track that will tell you what's happening on the screen that's not dialogue. So, for example: "Johnny is in the street. There is rain." That kind of thing, that tells you what a sighted person would be able to see, that is not dialogue. Otherwise, someone who is blind will just hear the dialogue in a film.

So those are some of the practices. The other practice that has been very important for us is having a quiet space with active listeners, so that if someone wants to talk about the film, or needs to step outside for a while and move their body, or just unpack what they're experiencing, there's a space for that.

These are a variety. I've given you a huge number of things. Nobody starts with all of them. You need to work with your community to see which things are going to be most important to the people who are interested and engaging with you.

Accessibility for artists, I think, is very important too. We often have venues that have those 4 seats, but the stage isn't accessible. I think that sends an awful message to people, like: "You're never going to be on the stage. We don't expect you to be presenting, or to be the artist."

Arts grants and funding applications are often extremely opaque and

difficult, and they're not accessible. I think that's another area we really need to look at. I know Canada Council [for the Arts] has done some work in making changes, but I think that there are a lot of barriers, institutionally there.

Juries don't often have artists with lived experiences of disability, or Deaf artists, on them. I think that's another important area to think about.

And then, your work environment: We don't think of ourselves often as human resources specialists in arts organizations, but we are employers, and so we really need to think about our own practices. Can someone have a flexible schedule when they need to? Can they work from home? If there are times when they're going to be unwell, can we work around that? Often in arts organizations, people have so much passion, and we work them really hard with that passion, some weeks 80 hours a week. That may not be possible for the people we want to make sure we're including. It's important to think about that.

Working with early-career artists and students is especially important in this area, because they often have had barriers and haven't had a chance to develop portfolios, to do that first two-minute film. They often haven't had that opportunity. Really investing in people at the beginning of their career is so important.

And equitable funding: For any of you who are from funding organizations, I'll just leave that there.

And some thoughts for organizations: Who's on your board? Is your board representative of disability and Deaf communities? Is there commitment for senior leadership? How do we recruit? How do people find out about opportunities at your organization? Are we recruiting in a way that people who have experienced barriers find out that there are opportunities? And so, on and on it goes.

Finally, a visual for you. These are some of the films that we had last year. The blue film is a film from a Deaf artist. The bottom, animated film is a film that we used in our children's program, and it's about a toy factory and what happens to toys that are considered broken. A beautiful film. The film on the upper right is called Adam's *Bar Mitzvah*, and it's about the bar mitzvah

of a non-speaking young adult with autism. And the film on the bottom right is from Australia. It's called: *The interviewer*, and it is about a human resources worker with Down syndrome in a large law firm in Australia.

I've thrown a ton at you, my apologies for that. We were asked to think about next steps, and I think that's where the conversation's going to get exciting between the three of us.

I would say: Engage with communities that you feel you're not engaging with, and set up a community advisory. Audit your organization: What are you doing that's working already? What do you maybe want to add? And collaborate with partners.

That is, I think, the most important. "Nothing about us, without us," and collaboration, are the heart of becoming more accessible. Thank you.

Cindy Schwartz

Thank you Liv, and thank you Tamar and Dan for this opportunity to speak.

Today, I'm going to speak a bit about the Muses and what we do as an organization, and also how we integrate, and some suggestions we might have at the end.

I'm starting with some photos, some taken from a *Cabaret* that we did at the Muses—something I'll talk about a bit later, with different pieces, one is a clown piece with a woman and a man, the other is a piece of absurd theatre, where the people are dressed in black, again a woman and a man. Another is a classroom in black and white, with many students around a teacher who has a keyboard and who's going to do a singing class. Another one is from *Zoo Story*, which we translated and did in English and French, which is rare for the Muses, because we're mainly a French organization with some English, with two men on a bench. And then, Johanne Blouin singing with one of our students, Anthony, with two microphones, and one scene from the film *Gabrielle*.

The Muses as an organization was founded in 1997, by myself. I started adapting and teaching dance, and eventually integrating people into mixed

classes in 1991, and started offering recreational programs.

After seeing talent with the clientele that I was working with, I decided at that point to transform the program from a recreational to a professional program for people with any kind of disability—that was the goal: people with a cognitive-developmental disorder, people with autism spectrum disorder, physical or sensory—the idea being to provide a professional and social setting that leads to the integration of advanced students and graduates into the artistic milieu.

It came into being, recreationally as well as professionally, to fill a void, because people with disabilities were not being… This was in 1991, so recreationally, very few people were being integrated, and professionally, training programs, and even today, I found out, not that much. So we designed a full-time program—5 days a week now, it used to be 4—in performing arts.

The mission is to train multi-talented artists professionally and promote their integration into professional practice. The idea is to sensitize the industry to the potential of these exceptional and emerging artists. It is thanks, in part, to this program that several artists were hired for the fictional film that some of you may have heard of, called *Gabrielle* by Louise Archambault, and done by Micro_scope in 2013.

Our vision and global objectives: Basically, it's a multidisciplinary, personalised and rigorous program, full-time as I said, one of the few that's a full-time training program in Canada for artists with disabilities. The goal is to adapt to the reality and the variety of the students and the disabilities that they have. It's also based on the needs and the reality of the professional artistic milieu to integrate people, so we really try to work with that milieu to figure out what their needs are as well.

We use different strategies, which I will also mention later, to increase visibility and to promote our students in Quebec in the cultural landscape, and across Canada as well as internationally. The international part is done mainly through companies, which I'll talk about later, who hire our students. Conscious of the need to offer a training program in the arts that will lead to national and international careers at the highest level, the Muses hires competent professors and teachers who work professionally as artists

themselves.

I have their names here. I'm not necessarily going to mention them all, but they are all artists within their own right, in each field that we offer. These teachers offer regular programs, but we also offer through that master classes by artists, directors and professors who work in the artistic milieu as well.

For example, Éric Jean, who was the director of the Quat'Sous for a long time, came to give a master class. He offered three classes, accompanied by our regular teachers. Or Emmanuel Jouthe, who is a choreographer here in Quebec who is pretty well-known, again, would go to our dance class, and I think he offered 10 sessions. The goal being that our students get to know these artists, but they also get to work with our students.

As I said, it's a full-time program, and people train for a minimum of five years, technically. They're allowed, though, contrary to some other programs in professional arts, to be hired in between those five years, but they always have to come back and finish their training.

Admission is based on an audition period, to give not just a one-time, but a maximum of chances to audition, where professors and coordinators of the Muses evaluate the artistic potential as well as the talent of the candidate. These are some of the results of the Muses. We have a picture here of a person with Down syndrome with Marina Orsini.

These are some of our most recent ones. In 2019, Jean-François Hupé, one of our students, obtained a recurring role in a television series that is now playing, called *Une autre histoire* on Monday nights on [Radio-Canada].

Gabrielle Marion-Rivard, from the film *Gabrielle*, who hasn't stopped working, basically—we tried to get her back for completing her training as much as we can, but she's being hired on a regular basis—obtained a role in 2019 as well for the piece *Cendres* which was presented at the Prospero theatre with the company Les Productions des Pieds des Mains.

In 2018, the company Joe Jack et John presented *Dis Merci*, or "Say Thank You," that one of our graduates was also integrated and starred in, with

three other non-disabled actors, at theatre Espace Libre, as well as the National Arts Centre in Ottawa.

Out of one of the master classes that Emmanuel Jouthe did, he worked with some of our students, and a company called Maï(g)wenn et les Orteils worked with him after that to reprise what they call *Écoute Pour Voir*, which is basically a one-on-one choreography with the spectator and the dancer. It's a piece that Emmanuel Jouthe developed and was taken by this company and integrated with several of our artists.

This'll be the last one, I guess, I'll tell you about for now. In 2017, Jean-François Hupé and Philippe David, again through a master class with a director and actor whose name is Michel Monty, got hired at the Rideau Vert for their production of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, which starred Julie Le Breton and Mathieu Quesnel, and was done in French as well. As I've been saying, in order to include our students, our goal was that they should have professional training, that it should be done at least for five years so that we can adapt it as much as is needed, and still bring it to a high level.

But one of the other things we do to sensitize the milieu—because it's wonderful to train, but if we don't have the milieu cooperating with artists, then we're not getting very far—so we invite artists to observe classes. We've had sort of "open houses" for time to time, where we will reach out to as many artists as we know, and since within the Muses, everybody's an artist already, they'll reach out to their connections and networks and invite them to open houses.

Any artist that is interested in the Muses. For example, Louise Archambault, before she actually did the film *Gabrielle*, must have spent a year on and off, observing different classes, and it was fine with us, and she developed her idea and as a result, convinced Micro_scope also to hire students. So we're open to any artist who wants to come and observe, or audition and maybe even work in a class, within our classes.

We also work with cultural organizations like the Union des Artistes (the French version of ACTRA), Culture Montréal, artists' associations in general to try to sensitize them to the inclusion of professional artists with a disability, and what the needs are.

We also act as an agent to some extent, so if a casting agent is looking for someone, and it's happening more and more thanks to the film a great deal, for a television role of somebody with a disability and they call us, then we will work it out with them so that it'll be easy to hire the student that we have.

We also have on our website the portfolio of our advanced or graduate students—so their CV, their professional photo, that we do for them, and we put it on the website, so anyone wanting to get an idea can look through that.

As I said, having master classes helped our students, but also helped the artists learn what it might be like to work with our students and what their needs might be, and since they're supported by our teachers and the organization, sometimes that makes it a bit easier to encourage them to work further after the project.

Every five years or so, the Muses produce a professional *Cabaret*, like the photos that I described at the beginning, where we go to a professional venue. We integrate professional artists with and without disabilities with our students. And we of course invite the artists of the milieu to come see it.

We'll help support artists and productions who want to hire our students, so either by suggesting people who can accompany the student and help the artist or the TV production or whoever. We have lots of ideas and we're open to sitting down with people, and we try to get that information out as much as possible.

As we were saying, now the Canada Council [for the Arts] has funding, which they have tried to work with to help artists who want to hire people with disabilities who are artists themselves. The Conseil des arts de Montréal (the Montreal council for the arts) as well is starting to put more funding out. To some extent, Quebec is getting on there as well. They're starting to open up, but they're still a bit of work to do. But there is support for artists who want to integrate other artists with disabilities and for the needs that they might have. The production, for example, takes a bit more time because you need more rehearsals, or it takes longer because you need an interpreter, or someone who's accompanying, or a coach. Those

possibilities are there.

There's also a fund called the "Ready, Willing and Able" fund here in Montreal, in Quebec I guess… [Whispers from the audience] nationally! Thank you, okay, so it's Canadian—that will help with the integration, I believe, of cognitive[ly disabled] and neurodiverse artists. When, for example, the Rideau Vert wanted to hire two of our students in the production *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, we suggested they apply for that and they did, which was encouraging.

Thank you.

Dan Ten Veen

Thank you so much. Just while we're switching slides: It's interesting to see our different journeys and measures that we've all taken to try to tackle these ideas of inclusion, accessibility. I think we have many things to talk about after this presentation, but also just how interesting it is that we've not only, as organizations, tried to tackle this idea but also maintain and look at artistic integrity and quality, and look at how we can collaborate with many different partners. We just have so many similarities, listening to your presentation, so it's for me really nice to be able to take this time out and listen to other journeys.

And so, without further ado, I will start my own presentation.

As mentioned before, my name is Dan Ten Veen, Co-Founder and Director of Spectrum Productions. I wanted to take a moment to thank everyone for being here to come listen to this talk. As I've mentioned before, I think it's somewhat of a niche topic, but it's something that's emerging and I'm really interested to see where this goes.

I did want to take a second to recognize that, as the director of an organization supporting Autistic teens and adults, I don't identify as Autistic. But I do try to integrate that voice into the organization and I just think it's worth noting that that's where I stand.

My presentation today is just from my observations over the past 10 years,

trying to find inroads and avenues to professional practice, or to creation. My talk today is entitled: *Changing the Conversation to One of Talent, Potential and Creativity*. It's about focusing our energy on advancing a culture of opportunity and accessibility.

Spectrum Productions: Our mission is to create opportunities for youth and young adults on the autism spectrum in media production and the arts. We do that by enabling folks to create content in their chosen digital medium. I'll get into more of what we do as an organization, but how we got here really began from this journey of realising that there's a lack of recognition for Autistic creatives and others.

I will also note that, while there is a need for many different communities and populations to be included, we decided to focus our energy where we had some experience in supporting.

Through a number of factors, we ended up on this realization of addressing barriers to practice. Part of this journey began from trying to find funding, trying to find similar avenues that I've heard discussed tonight. We worked on partnering with the Banff Center for the Arts, for example, trying to find funding through Canada Council, watching this whole process of starting to see what funding bodies could potentially support. Looking at larger institutions, looking at setting up a residency at the Banff Center for the Arts, for example, that became this realization that there were so many different barriers to actually setting that up, that we had to back up, and start building from the ground up, and building capacity as an organization.

Where we started was, we needed to build a center for content creation, for building skills, and building generally our capacity as an organization. To do that, we realised that setting up individually tailored pathways was important for folks to be able to reach their goals—whether that's a career goal, or self-expression goal, whether that's in media production, or the arts, or for some, it's a hobby, too. It depends on where they choose.

Also, realising that having multiple specialties to aim for. For example, folks that may want to be a sound designer, or someone that wants to be acting on the stage, or… There's many different roles, as we all know, in the arts or in media production, to express, to create, that we can access, so making sure that we were offering those different pathways to get there.

Also, I think that it's important to note, as a reflection, that our success metrics are, "Are we succeeding at providing programming?" We tried to really focus on: "Are folks motivated to engage in the activity that we're providing in the content creation space, and are they engaged?" Versus perhaps some other metrics that might be more prevalent.

I guess that brings me to how we got here, this idea of interrogating access, and us being at this talk, for example, sharing what our best practices are, what our institutional model is. I don't know if it is a best practice. Perhaps sharing across this table, we're seeing some emerging strategies that worked, and haven't. But for me, where I started as an educator, challenging that system has been really important for me.

Learning what our members', our users' motivations and interests are, and using that as our starting point to design our programs, and to continue to centre our activities on what our members' motivations are, versus what we might think our organizational goals could be.

That's in contrast to, again, I'm going to look at the education system, where you have to jump through a certain number of steps, whether you enjoy that or not, and it's not necessarily going to help you reach your goals.

There's so many different opportunities to put effort towards building accessible practices and for us, we took two things to keep ourselves focused on: One was just that we're working to build opportunities. Another is that we want to make sure it's accessible. And it's not just accessible in all the different ways that we've—well, we'll get into that later, but also to all levels of ability and expression style and challenging what, societally, folks think might be possible.

Again, we have more to learn. We always have more to learn, and we're super interested, that's why we're here.

A theme that's emerged also—I brought it up before—changing the conversation to one of talent, creativity and potential. We're shifting how conversations begin. What are folks' goals, what are their motivations: We're keeping our focus there. We're trying to design a structure in a way that allows each user to define their path, to be steering that, and we're

trying to focus our energy. So it's a little bit of a recap of the past points, and I just wanted to bring this back to imagine, as a creator, somebody accessing our organization, our institution. How would it feel when you're asked about your aspirations, your motivations? And that's the guiding feature in how you first enter our "system," our organization.

We're setting up these structures, and I think often it is about this narrative of overcoming challenge, and that tends to be valued over what someone's creative expressive ideas are, and trusting that's going to be represented. To bring it back to "What do we do at Spectrum?" I haven't explained it that much. We have a wide variety and diversity of programs. We run seven days a week at this point, throughout the year. There's many different access points. They're all leading to our Creative Media Lab, which is our professional stream program. It was our original goal, but we realised that we had to build some stepping stones, some foundations to be able to get there.

This wide variety of programs—I'm not going to get into it, because I will get distracted [laughs], but our Creative Media Lab is the flagship program of the organization, it's our professional stream pathway. How we're doing it is, we're really looking at this hands-on project-based creation model. There's three parts to it: There's creative content, there's outlet for self-expression, there's professional stream. So once you're practicing in this arena, in a creative sense, you're preparing yourself for pursuing a professional pathway. And of course, we need training, different training elements that folks can pick and choose from, based on what their path is.

All those other programs are a kind of interest realm, or exploratory realm. Our Creative Media Lab is trying to move those interests to real skills acquisition, to talent development and pursuing that career pathway. Again, it's a program intended to transition folks into professional practice, and into their professional talent pool.

This notion of access—we're continually interrogating ourselves, and I'm very interested to continue to be challenged in this journey. We've put a lot of effort into our physical space. We've added things like air-conditioning, making sure that there are no scents in the space. There's a wide variety of lists that I heard mentioned earlier tonight.

Part of how we're making our space accessible is trying to pass on that feeling of ownership to our members. When you're walking in the room, it's not myself that's greeting and welcoming you, it's our members that are feeling ownership over the space. Part of that is that we tried to design our space to encourage movement. You can see an image there, of our main production room. You can have a lot of different points in that room where you can be observing, watching, engaged, but not necessarily sitting around the table. There's a screen in the back. We tend to put that on, and you could be observing from many different points, and you see our members doing that kind of thing all the time. So having that choice in your level of engagement, but still being a part of it, has been very valuable for us.

Bringing up the notion of our style of developing access: It really, for us, started by enabling motivated creatives and exploring those skills that they're interested in investing in.

So making sure that our members, our creatives, are deciding that they want to invest in developing that skill. As I brought up before, part of it is a challenge to the education system, those standards that don't necessarily fit Autistic learners and many other learners. How can we turn that system around and try to approach it differently?

We built our space with purpose, as well, to ensure that we are modelling those professional settings. If you want people to be landing in a professional career, or a professional stream, we want to make sure that we're modelling that same setting.

A guiding feature as well in our style is this idea of organized chaos. Coming to building our programming plan, always starting off with this very clear plan of how we're going to achieve access to space, or whatever, and then really looking at it. Once the programming starts, we're engaging with the chaos. We want it to be flipped on its head and to have our programming be thrown out the window, and our users kind of take that and run with it, and learn in their own way. So organized chaos is built into our design. We want that chaos to happen [laughs].

As well, culture is worth noting. Something that we really try to push is this idea of feeling safe and respected as a core metric to be in our space, and

everybody deserves to have that. How we're getting there is that we're valuing, listening to people's ideas. And instead of having the rules, we're taking about the "why" behind the respect, and the feeling safe, and using that as a conversation piece to break it down. Often we're learning a lot of things about the "why" behind somebody's anxieties or fears, also that we can then turn back into a productive outcome.

Again, creative ideas are valued before this prescribed notion of overcoming challenge that… you know, I think that's changing. But often that tends to be the narrative that I've observed, anyway, that would tend to get funded. I think that both are worth expressing. But I think that in our studio, we try to push the creative ideas first. Within our space, the desire to create content is really the only prerequisite to join. While we might identify as an organization that's having different support skills, and whatever, the desire to create content is what it takes to be a part of our community, and that's all.

Access tools: We've leveraged a lot of technologies to increase access in our space. I could go on about that forever, but I think there's so many technologies that are out there. This hands-on learning model has really been this incredible tool, and making sure that, along with our professional environment, we're offering those professional tools that are going to set people up for a career pathway.

Our community: Mentoring is something that we've worked hard to build up, and we're continuing to build. We've been reaching out to folks in the VFX community, in the arts and theatre community. We've been setting up internships with university programs. Again, like I've heard mentioned before, it's a connection to that professional talent pool. People are building relationships and we're starting to explore each other's spaces and know each other, and that's how we build community.

Of course: Disseminating the work that's created in our space and others' who are submitting to us. We've been holding a screening, called *Spectrum Fest*. It's run for two years now. To go with that is to have others submit their films, neurodiverse films, folks who want to be part of the celebration of Autistic film.

Again, it's not exclusive. Building up partners in that regard has helped

us to reach that. I think two more at the table here, Oboro building up our partnership together has been something that's very valuable to us, and it's really what helps us to expand our capacity.

Our goals in the future, just in wrapping up, is for us to increase access beyond our programs and studio. We're at this point where we have a list for everything. We have a full studio. How do we extend what we've learned, and the movement that started to extend beyond? So really, that comes with building community in the sector. I saw it coming together with this talk tonight. We want to continue to learn more and build more opportunities for the community we built within Spectrum and also those around us.

Second to last slide: Suggestions for other organizations. Just from my observations and approach: Approaching with curiosity, how to build from your current capacity, I think, is important. And then, making strategic decisions and taking time to reflect on the actions that you do take, I think, is a really important thing. We only have so much energy, so are we going to do a one-off initiative that might be helpful as a pilot to experiment, but what can you plan for that's going to stick? That's probably the thing that's more worth putting energy into.

Is there something that complements your mission? Already, you might be doing things that are quite easy to build on, and again, what are the access benefits that might benefit other users than the intended group? I think that there's examples of this all the time. Having text on screen or audio description might benefit a variety of people, and it's just going to raise the capacity of what we do and the community, and probably engagement. I think it was mentioned earlier that we're just going to engage more people. Final slide: Some concrete ideas to increase access based on my observations. This visual, this relaxed performance, it's really about front-loading the information available. I think there's a variety of ways to do that. I'm personally very interested in trying to develop tools that we can replicate and all use as a sector. One idea that we've started to explore is just giving how to navigate to our physical space. The idea behind that: If you have a lot of information and preparation time on just how to arrive, perhaps there'll be more energy available to engage in a creative sense, or in other ways. Having an accessibility statement: It's something that I was challenged to do, and realised that we did not have one on our website. It's a very easy

step to take.

Having a quiet space and flexible rules, I've heard mentioned tonight: It's super important to be able to have that space to decompress or to choose what works for you in accessing either services, or employment, or programming, or screenings.

Integrating technology solutions: There's so many out there. It really comes from looking at your specific scenario. And again, partnerships mean shared capacities.

I just wanted to bring up in closing Oboro and Spectrum: We partnered to offer this cross-organizational residency as a pilot. For us, it's meant that we have been able to become more accessible, not by changing anything that our organizations had, but just by partnering together and recognizing each of our skills, to be able to pull off this series. So, a shared capacity is something that's very valuable.

And that's it! Thank you so much for listening.

(End of transcription)

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