



IETM REPORT

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EVERYONE HAS AN OPINION, BUT ONLY MINE IS RIGHT

Report from the IETM Hull Plenary Meeting, 28 – 31 March 2019

by Vassilka Shishkova



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Moderators Jo Verrent and Israel Aloni took a practical approach to the art of disagreeing and offered the participants the opportunity to explore their own boundaries when being in an argument with those who hold different opinions and still remaining in dialogue. In several working groups, the participants discussed how central diversity is to their art practices. They also reflected on whether policy makers should or should not insist on every arts organisation putting diversity onto its agenda. Doing so, they reached certain conclusions along with identifying the characteristics of a fruitful dialogue: clear definitions of the subject, awareness of other people's reasons behind their opinions, attention to arguments, defining areas of disagreement and subsequently finding the common ground.

The art of disagreement

Soon after their first conversations, Jo and Israel realised that, although both actively supported the cause of diversity and inclusion, they differed largely on the reasons why they did so. This realisation changed their initial plans for the session and brought them to the idea to rather investigate with the participants why diversity matters before trying to find ways how to achieve it. Furthermore, Israel believes the critical approach towards the topic will foster a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and could lead to more effective ways to tackle issues of inclusion and diversity, instead of just riding a current trend and 'ticking boxes' in response to funders' requirements.

Presumably, there could be as many reasons why diversity is valuable (or not) as there are people in the room – hence, it is crucial to establish constructive dialogue, especially in cases of disagreement. Disagreement is not something bad; on the contrary, it enriches us with yet another



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Moderators:

Jo Verrent, Senior producer of Unlimited commissions programme at Artsadmin, UK

Israel Aloni, Artistic director and choreographer at iDance, Sweden / Australia

point of view and gives us the opportunity to revise our arguments and beliefs. We learn more from those who disagree with us, from those whose points of view differ the most from ours, Jo insisted.

So, how can we have constructive conversations with people who do not agree with us? Jo and Israel decided not to impose rules on the group, because "setting rules somehow implies that there is only one way to have a debate, and that is definitely not true". Instead, the moderators demonstrated the basic principles of a constructive debate by asking three questions and requesting the participants to reflect on their arguments, on the language they use, and the emotions that have been triggered.

The participants were invited to put a mark in reply to each question on three boards, depending on their agreement, disagreement or neutrality (or their good, bad or neutral experiences). Some people put a simple cross or a dot while others drew intricate pictures.

Here follow the main conclusions from this exercise.

- **Usually, there is a background story, a personal experience to back a statement**

An easy question: "How was your trip to Hull?", with a simple scale of replies: "light and easy – so-so – difficult", proved that one should try to understand the background reasons behind any statement. If we wish to

have a constructive dialogue, we should ask questions and listen to the other person's experience. The hardest journey to Hull happened to be that of a participant from Hull: she moved back to town some years ago, and that was a difficult decision for her.

- **People differ in their perception of a certain subject and make evaluations subjectively**

"How central is diversity to your practice?"

– this question invited the participants to reflect whether their organisation, artistic work, and audience reflect the diversity of the societies they live and work in; and to what extent. Some participants marked that diversity is in the core of their practice, fewer – that it is irrelevant for them, and the highest number of people indicated themselves as 'being in the middle'.

But what is the premise of these estimations? Is there a universal formula to measure diversity in an organisation, art practice, or audience? Of course, not. All the answers were based on subjective perceptions of diversity. So, any conversation on this topic has to start with clarifying what our personal understanding of diversity is and what levels of diversity we recognise.

For instance, a person who has indicated that diversity is not part of the thinking of his organisation explained that while the work he stages and produces is mostly queer and gay, the venues he collaborates with don't put any stress on diversity, nor that the audiences who come and see the show are diverse: "they are predominantly white, middle class, not disabled, mostly heterosexual people who simply pay to see a show in a conventional theatre space".

An outdoor arts organisation has identified itself on the other side of the spectrum because their aim is to be 'totally inclusive' by making participatory street theatre and carnivals that are for everybody.

The reasons behind putting a mark on the 'completely inclusive' board ranged widely, from the desire to be completely inclusive as an organisation to acknowledgement of the fact that achieving total inclusion is beyond the capacity of arts organisations so

there is a strong need of systemic change in our societies. Since so many economic and social factors hamper inclusion, changes on the level of laws and regulations are required in order to achieve systematic diversity and inclusion in all aspects of our public life. Only then we can have 'totally inclusive' art practices and organisations.

- **Language brings the biggest misunderstanding. Again, language can sort it out**

"Should policy makers place the duty on every arts organisation to deliver on the agenda of diversity and inclusion?" – the formulation of the third question posed a challenge to the moderators. 'Should', 'duty', 'deliver', 'inclusion' – all these words were already suggesting and implying the answers. A constructive conversation starts from clearing out the language that is used to define the topic of the discussion. Although this seems an obvious thing to do, it is surprising how often people omit this step, assuming everybody operates with the same context, only to find in mid-conversation that even those who agree with each other often understand things differently - and the whole discussion has to return to this initial point of language clarification and setting up common definitions. (Later on, in the small group discussions, the participants highlighted once again the underlying impediments related to almost any terms around diversity and inclusion.)

So, how did – according to their own subjective understanding of the terms involved - the participants decide on policy makers requiring the implementation of diversity from arts organisations? What arguments did they base their opinions on?

Yes, they should

"If you are in receipt of public money, you are obliged to make it accessible to the whole of the society", insisted a voice, supporting the statement that policy makers should require arts organisations to be diverse and to make inclusive work. "On the condition that arts professionals are supplied with the means and the expertise to do so", another participant added.

"I put my voice for obligatory requesting arts organisations to set up an inclusion agenda not because I believe that turning it into an obligation will make things work – but because I clearly see that the status quo is not working" – explained her position another participant. She pointed out that just a few people of colour were present at the session. The point is, when we look around, we should seek not who is present but who is not there yet. Inclusion is an ongoing process, not a goal to achieve and be forgotten.

On one hand, it is necessary, on the other – it formalises inclusion

The shared concern was that when the cause of achieving diversity becomes a policy, it could be easily degraded into a formality to get the funding. At the same time, there is a need of certain guidelines on how to make your organisation diverse, how to work with different audiences, how to make inclusive work. If the need for diversity and inclusion is not constantly propagated, it will fall down in the agenda or worse, it could be substituted by shallow political correctness.

"How do policies work? They want something from you and they offer you an incentive, i.e. a funding if you cooperate or punish you if you don't follow the instructions. The carrot and the stick trick. But we, artists, are not donkeys. That should not work with us."

"Applying policies for achieving diversity could work – another participant argued - but we need to know who makes the policy. If that is an inclusive organisation, that has already embraced diversity, that would work. And if it is the old type of white-middle class-private school-predominantly male organisation, that would hardly bring the change we want to see in the art sector."

No, they should not

"I don't think policy makers should impose a requirement on arts organisations to embrace diversity. That will degrade the whole idea to people ticking boxes to get the funding they need."

“The easiest policy makers’ response to exclusion is to impose quotas. And quotas don’t solve problems with diversity, they don’t mean real inclusion.”

“Artists have to have the choice - if they want to create work that is not inclusive, to do so. Artists need freedom to experiment, to push boundaries, to make mistakes.”

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The participants gathered in several smaller groups to practise some constructive disagreement skills: listen to each others’ arguments, ask questions, clarify definitions, be self-aware of one’s own manner of disagreeing. And the topics of these in-depth discussions were highly disputable: what language can we use to embrace diversity; can artists make work that does not include everyone; would it be reasonable if policy makers require from arts organisations to follow a diversity agenda; whose stories get told and by whom; who is excluded and how to counteract exclusion.

Here follow their conclusions on the topics and on the character of the discussions they had.

The moderators suggested to form groups with people who rather disagree on the topics of diversity and inclusion, but the participants found the advice difficult to follow. They could hardly find anybody in the room with whom they would really disagree on these topics. Indeed, the older you get, more often you end up in a room with people who share the same viewpoints as yours. Nonetheless, there proved to be many points of difference, nuances and varying definitions to debate on.

- What language to use when speaking on topics of diversity outlined the broadest variation of opinions. It became apparent that terms such as quota, diversity, underrepresentation mean quite a different thing in different socio-economic context, different cultures, and even subjectively, for each individual using them. Therefore, most of the group discussions had to start with reaching



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some common definitions on the main subjects discussed.

- One can definitely learn more from situations of disagreement than from having conversations with likeminded persons. Your understanding of your own beliefs is broadened when you actively try to understand what is behind other person’s opinions.
- In conversations about inclusion and diversity, one should be aware not to take the voice of those subjected to exclusion, if they are already present in the room. Surely, they have better arguments based on their first-hand experience. And it is them who will speak for themselves.
- Speaking about the usually excluded groups, a person with disability noted: “We have learned to be quite vocal when we encounter discrimination against our own group but often, we end up outshouting each other ‘My problems are the biggest! My group is the most discriminated one!’ – when we need to listen to each other and find ways to counteract exclusion unitedly, as it is a system error.”
- But how to establish a common ground when everybody feels to be tripping into language, often saying things that differed largely from the thoughts they ought to convey... A new language around inclusion has to

be elaborated – one that is free from constraint, a choice-driven language, clear from implicit meanings that support the status quo. “Wasn’t equality a more inclusive term than diversity?“, someone argued. If we share equal opportunities, there will not be a need for quotas, which proved to be a shallow measure that does not offer a sustainable solution.

Yet we, the participants in an IETM session on inclusion, are not equal with those who are not part of the conversation, who cannot afford to be part of the conversation. We have the privilege to have the professional specialisation, time and resources to attend this meeting. No matter which ‘group’ we represent, we are in a position of power to those who cannot join. We should keep asking ourselves: what does it take to be in this room? We should always be aware of who is not present and why, be it people of colour, people with disabilities, people from remote communities, migrants, women, men, transgenders, queer, poor... Inclusion is an ever-going effort and it is our responsibility – and ability – to carry it on.