

Access; it's all about breaking the rules

Now when I was preparing for this talk, I was thinking how do I convince them? How do I convince all of these talented people, experts in their own fields, to care about what I care about? So that's how I'm going to start.

I'm here to talk about access. And by access I mean the big things and little things that all of us can do as human beings, to make the world a more equal place. And to make our museums and galleries more equal places. And why is that important? Well because, as Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights says "We are all born free and equal".

And that's a really powerful statement.

So powerful actually that I put it on my first Powerpoint slide ... "We are all born free and equal."

Now, there are many things that can happen in our lives that we have choice and control over. Like deciding who to be in a relationship with, where to buy your groceries, who to work for.

But there are some things that happen in our lives that we don't have choice or control over. Like, for example, having an impairment. But it's not the fact that someone is in a wheelchair that really causes a problem, it's because man invented steps. And it's not the fact that someone can't hear that causes a problem, it's the fact that man decided at some point that we could communicate via speaking. Via noise. So you can see that it's not the person with the impairment that's causing any kind of problem, it's society and the barriers that humans create for other human beings that's the issue.

We are all born free and equal. This statement is correct. It's fact. But it's also a fact that society divides, separates and disenfranchises. And when I say society, I mean people.

Now I know that's a fairly glum note to start a presentation – because what I'm basically saying is that lots of people are screwing things up for lots of other people. And that's not very nice. But ... there is some good news.

Because if people are screwing things up, then it also means that people can also fix things. This isn't an 'act of god' problem, or a 'mother nature' problem that we have no control over. We're not talking about a Queensland hail storm or Victorian bush fire. This is a problem people are creating for themselves ... and so people can also fix this problem. And by people, I mean me and I mean you.

So let's look at the statistics. Statistically 20% of the Australian population identify as experiencing disability. Now there's two very important parts to that sentence. The first is the figure ... 20% of the population, that's a significant number of human beings. The second important part is the word identify. Because there's also lots of people living their lives with disability, who don't identify as experiencing disability. And they don't identify because disability is an ugly word. And it's hard. And it's full of stigma. So when we talk about 20% of the population identifying, in reality there's probably lots more people living with disability.

And there's another factor to consider. Someone in a wheelchair may identify as a disabled person. A mum with a pram may not identify as a disabled person. But they may have exactly the same access requirements ... And by access requirements I mean things like the fact that they can't navigate stairs, they need wide walk ways and doorways so they can pass through easily, they need space when using toilet facilities and crucially they are both potentially customers for your museums and galleries.

Someone who is hard of hearing may identify as Deaf. An older person, like my dad for example who's losing their hearing and in complete denial about that, may not identify as Deaf. But they may also have exactly the same access requirements ... they need captions on TV screens so they can understand what people are saying, they need the person speaking to face them so they can lip read, they need lots of light to be able to see that person, and they are both potentially customers for your museums and galleries.

I could go on – I'm sure you get the point. Access is important for everyone. It's not just to cater for the 20% of people who identify as experiencing disability. It's for the mums and dads, the granddads and grandmas, the grandkids. It's for everyone.

And this is why we need to start breaking the rules in this sector. So my talk is entitled "Access; it's all about breaking the rules." And here's why ... because we have become a population who designs and caters for the masses. We encourage homogenous behavior. And I kind of think that's boring. It's really samey. It's bland.

And when you design for the masses, every time you want to cater for someone who does things or sees things a bit differently, you have to add something on to make it accessible. You add a touch tour, or an Auslan tour. So it becomes this big, monstrous thing with an extra talk here or an additional session there. And it gets confusing and I'm sure some of you have experienced, becomes a nightmare to market and promote to the people who you want to be able to access that very thing.

But how about if we began to do things a bit differently. If we looked at new ways of designing, of creating, of building from the ground up so that rather than creating spaces where everyone's expected to behave in a certain way, you allow people to engage in lots of different ways. And each individual could choose which way they as an individual wants to engage. This is really about embedded access into the look and feel of spaces, and not only exhibition space, but café spaces and shops. And not doing it because some legislation says you should. Or because the local disability advocate has been giving you a hard time and writing you some bad press. Doing it because everyone benefits.

And remember ... we are all born free and equal.

Now one of the wonderful things that happens when you start to go down this path of thinking differently, designing differently, getting rid of the parameters in which you thought you had to work, is that life becomes a bit more exciting. Because whether you were a straight A student or you dropped out before even starting high school, we all learnt at some point in our lives that breaking the rules is fun, right?

You begin to see things differently. You realize that 'standard eye level' for hanging pictures is kind of a bit of a nonsense, because a bell curve means that you only get a really narrow proportion of people who that actually caters for. That standard wouldn't really cater for a large proportion of people who go through galleries.

So why not switch things up a bit. Make people think. Make a statement with where you hang some work.

Let's think about that traditional gallery setting for while. And think about how the work gets displayed in the venues that you work in and visit. How about if it was hung differently? What are the benefits? What are the draw backs? Maybe some people wouldn't really be able to access the work at all.

Well if that's the case, have the images available on postcards to see close up. Or an ipad where people can scroll through a series of images. It means someone who struggles to stand for long periods of time can sit and look. Someone with a visual impairment can look at an angle that works best for them. And someone who is short statured can see the work at a height that works best for them. Not to mention the fact that grandma and her grandchild can sit and look at the work at the same time, on the same device – they're sharing the art work, and the learning of technology.

So that's an example with 2D works but what about 3D works ... think about blind people accessing sculptures. Venues will often run touch tours. Some venues also have model replicas that can be touched and moved around. I know as a sighted person, when I've had that experience I develop a much deeper learning, and a much stronger connection with that work ... and that's generally true whether someone is visually impaired or not.

So if you build the opportunity to touch into exhibitions as standard, suddenly you don't need separate touch tours. You don't need a separate person to plan that tour, another person to deliver the tour and a marketing person to promote the tour ... touch just becomes part of what you offer. To everybody.

So I'm not talking about rocket science here. It really is quite simple and it's just about thinking differently. And that's where people with disability themselves come in.

Now for me, there's something pretty amazing about having a disability. And I'm speaking from my own personal experience. My impairment means I see the world in a very different way to lots of other people. It means I think differently. It means I have different ideas. It's a winner when it gets to me being creative. And in many ways it's a huge asset.

And that may be interesting for some of you to hear, because for many years we've heard how people with disability are less well off. All the pictures that get painted, all the books that you read about people with disability is that it's a horrible affliction. That disability ruins your life. Well for me personally that's not the case. Disability is a very individual thing and I want to make it clear that I'm not speaking for everyone with disability when I say that. But one thing that I think lots of people with disability do have in common, is how different they feel and react in environments where people do think through their access needs.

So my access needs mean I function best in spaces that aren't too crowded, where I have easy access to outside spaces, where walk ways are wide and open and where I am free to move around at my own pace. I like spaces that aren't too noisy, that don't have too much light stimulation, but are also quite vibrant and eclectic. And I like environments that are well signposted – I don't like to feel like I don't know where I am or where I'm going.

When I visit museums and galleries, the biggest determining factor for me is often the customer service. Because I don't expect every place I visit to be able to cater for all of my needs. That's quite a complex list. But if I have options, I'm welcomed, and the staff and

volunteers I interact with have the confidence to ask me and have positive, solution focused responses, then I feel very well catered for.

So when there are problems, what's the quickest and easiest way to fix some of these problems? Just ask. Talk to people about their experiences in your venues. Talk to people with disability. Talk to them about what they like and don't like. Invite people with disability into the venue specifically and be prepared for and invite some really honest feedback.

Tell people you want to make improvements but that you know you probably have some work to do. And make sure they give you their honest feedback.

I can tell you what I need, what my access requirements are, but I can't speak on behalf of someone in a wheelchair, or someone who is blind or someone who's Deaf. So you need to engage with lots of different people.

Identify the problems. And don't feel that you need to have all of the solutions. Or indeed any solutions. But do be part of the process.

And remember, one of the magic things about people with disability is that they already see the world differently. They can come up with ideas and solutions that you would never have thought of, or they might identify problems that you could never see, but by making changes, you make the entire experience better for everybody.

And we are all born free and equal.

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Now I'm just going to pause for a second here and show you a video. This video is a showreel for the organisation I work with – Arts Access Australia. We're the national peak body for arts and disability in Australia, and this showreel highlights a few of the key points I want to make in the rest of my conversation with you today.

FILM

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So there are a few themes I'd like to pick out of that film. The first one is about representation. There's that great quote at the end that Gaelle Mellis says of Jenny Sealy who's a theatre practitioner in the UK. And she says "Shakespeare didn't say Juliette wasn't a wheelchair user."

It's a perfect example of how we've been conditioned to think a certain way ... but if we think a bit differently, a whole new world of possibilities opens up.

And representation is super important. I think most of us at some point in our lives have had one of those moments where we've seen someone on a TV program, or film, up on a stage who we feel we can connect with somehow. And because they're doing something, it means that there's a possibility that we might be able to achieve that too. That sense of representation and connection.

And I experience it quite frequently around my disability – because my impairment isn't visible, people often come and talk to me after events like this about how to manage

hidden impairments, how to talk to other people about mental health, and the stigma that surrounds it and the concerns that go with it. And that's why I always think it's super important to identify.

So seeing yourself represented is key. And that's true in lots of different arenas; in the work place, on TV, on the walls of galleries, in museum experiences, on the promotional material for an event or exhibition, creates a sense of connection and belonging. It says you're welcome here. It's huge. And our cultural institutions are meant to represent the people. Would you say that your venue has 20% of the work that's currently on display by, or featuring people with disability?

Because if not, it's not representational of the people.

There's representation on the walls and in the exhibitions, but there's also representation in the staff team and on the boards. How many people in your workplace identify as experiencing disability? How many people on your boards identify as experiencing disability? Is it 20%? Because if it's not, it's not representational of this country.

One of the really great things that we do at Arts Access Australia is ask everyone who starts working with us to complete an access needs form. So we're not talking about impairments, we're talking about access needs. And we're not just talking about people with disability. We ask everyone.

- Talk to visitors with disability and invite their feedback
- Engage staff and board members with disability and invite their feedback
- Make sure everything in your experience is representative
- Talk about access requirements

In terms of the paperwork and the legislation that was talked about, think about a Disability Action Plan.

The Australia Council for the Arts have a great Disability Action Plan and they've done some really proactive work around their Plan. So theirs is a good template to look at. We also got some resources on our website to help you build some of these documents.

And I expect at this stage, some of you may be thinking 'but that's not really my job'. I don't do policy. I don't do marketing or promotion. Well, right at the start of my presentation I told you I'm here to talk about access. And why?

Because we are all born free and equal.

And it's all of our responsibility to make the world a more equal place.

So whilst it might not be in your job description, it can be in your conscious choice to get on board with this. Whether or not we feel it's our responsibility to try and change some things that happen in our society and make the world a more equal place, it is your choice. There will be something that you can do, in your role.

The other theme I want to pick out of the film is one of partnerships.

I'm going to share with you a story that I heard at a conference but I can't remember who told this story. So I apologies for not quoting my sources.

It's about gaming. Anyone who's got kids who are into gaming, it's fine. They're the future, those kids, they're going to sort us out. Here's the story.

A group of scientists had been struggling with a scientific problem. A DNA problem. They'd be struggling with it for about 15 years. And finally they got to the point where they were went, "nope we can't do this anymore".

They turned it into a computer game. Because science fits neatly into parameters. They gave it to some really experienced gamers. It took them 48 hours to solve the problem.

And I like sharing that example because it shows how two groups of people from very different environments can come together and produce amazing results. And the same things happen when you start to engage with people with disability.

You develop partnerships. You have conversions. You bring in someone different who sees a problem in a different way and finds an innovative solution for you.

In the film, Kate Larsen, our former CEO said, "you can talk all you like, but nothing really changes until you start doing something".

So I'm gonna ask you to start doing something in your venues.

People get scared about disability because they think access is going to cost huge amounts of money. It doesn't have to. Especially when you embed it into the look and feel of spaces and into the design thinking rather than adding it on.

Making physical spaces could just be as easy as moving things around in a room to make it accessible.

If you think about captions on a film, YouTube do that for free and as standard.

Having an Auslan interpreter at every single one of your exhibition launches is gonna set you back a whopping \$300 dollars, that's nothing, you probably spend more on champagne.

And with technology, it's super easy to make things in accessible formats. But don't just say that you're going to do it, have it on display. Don't make someone ask for this stuff. People have to ask all of the time.

A great example here actually. A beautiful open space. And when I arrived I thought wow, ok if you're in a wheelchair or you have a pram, this space is amazing. But to get to the café you have to go round the back and past the toilets. Does everybody want to access a space by having to go round the back? Imagine if that's your reality everyday. There's so much space to create a ramp out the front, and it wouldn't break the bank.

But I think the point that's most crucial here is about people. People are part of the problem. And people are also part of the solution. If you engage with people with disability in every area of your work things will begin to change. Make sure your staff and volunteers are comfortable and confident talking to people with disability. Begin to embed the term access requirements into everything that you do. Talk about this stuff as often as you possibly can. Educate colleagues and friends.

Stop creating for one kind of person. It's boring and it's bland.

And we should all be doing this.

Because we're all born free and equal.

So start a mini-revolution in your venue.

Thank you.