Fancy Dance Fundraiser – My Last Day with Hijinx



Total Word Count: 2527

Placement Portfolio
Aimee Williams

Hijinx

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About Placement

Hijinx – Hijinx Academies – West Academy – Performance Training

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Their key initiatives

1. Theatre: Product

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Hijinx –

Hijinx is a leading inclusive theatre company in Europe, focused on exceptional performances by learning disabled and/or autistic artists in theatre and film, serving audiences in Wales and beyond.

heir key initiatives include:

Their key initiatives include:

1. Theatre: Productions featuring learning disabled and/or autistic artists, touring nationally and internationally.
2. Community Performance: Engaging local communities through performances and workshops.
3. Training: Programs to enhance performing arts skills for learning disabled and/or autistic individuals.
4. Business Training: Inclusive communication training for businesses.
5. Film: Producing films that showcase the talents of learning disabled and/or autistic artists.
6. Casting: Helping the artists find opportunities in the performing arts.

Hijinx Academies –

These artists attend Hijinx Academies which provide specialised training for these actors, focusing on:

Skills Development:
Participants learn audition techniques, physical theatre, improvisation, clowning, dance, and acting for screen and radio, enhancing their confidence for professional careers.

Tutors:
Courses are led by experienced industry professionals from across Wales, offering valuable local insights.

Locations:

Academies are based in:

-Cardiff (South 1 Academy, South 2 Academy)

-Colwyn Bay (North Academy)

-Carmarthen (West Academy)

-Aberystwyth (Mid Academy)

Objective:

The aim is to build a network of actors with learning disabilities and/or autism in Wales, preparing them for opportunities in theatre, film, and television.

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West Academy –

12 participants

8 male, 4 female

Varying literarcy abilities and capacities

Varying disabilities present

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West Academy –

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Enthusiastic

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Imaginative

Community

Representation

Humour

Engaged

Supportive

Accessible

Creative

12 participants
8 male, 4 female
Varying literarcy abilities and capacities
Varying disabilities present

Performance Training –

Rose - Playback conductor – Devising and Improvisations

Amy - Hijinx Employee – Representation Project

Angharad - Aerial and Dance Instructor – Dance and Movement

Crisian - Hijinx Employee – Casting and Promotion

Simon - Actor – Script and Prop Work

Jorge - Photographer – Photography and Digital Editing

Beth - Set Design Lecturer and Stage Manager – Script Work

Timara - 'Housemates' Coordinator – Dance/Production Choreography

Insights from the Performance Trainers –

Rose – Remaining compassionate and mindfully aware amidst the tumultuous unpredictabilityof the gathering's location.

Amy – Navigating representation demands a careful and considerate awareness.

Angharad – Continuous positive energy and encouragement leaves lasting impression on participants.

Crisian – Honesty is the best approach and choose your conflicts wisely.

Simon – Keep your expectations high, provided that you equip everyone with the necessary resources to meet them.

Jorge – Harness your enthusiasm while remaining patient and clear when engaging with participants.

Beth – Utilising your distinct personality to build relationships and connections with participants.

Timara –Clear guidance, positive encouragement, and a comfortable environment for engagement.

Direct Observations

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Direct Observations

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During my placement at Hijinx, I observed a range of strategies implemented by facilitators aimed at enhancing actor training. Each of these approaches played a significant role in fostering a unique and supportive environment that celebrated individual differences among participants. As I have previously indicated, certain strategies were rooted in the intrinsic qualities of the facilitators themselves, reflecting their personal strengths and characteristics. In contrast, other strategies were specifically designed to cultivate a positive outlook on participant engagement, encouraging active involvement and enthusiasm. Furthermore, a considerable number of these strategies were intentionally crafted to ensure that every participant felt valued and recognized, thereby reinforcing a sense of belonging and appreciation within the training context.

The group demonstrated significant creativity and mutual support; however, participation varied during my involvement due to factors like health issues, acting commitments, and inconsistent meeting locations. Some members experienced health challenges, which heightened group tension. Concerns arose regarding the facilitator's management of this tension. For example, in the first session, when a participant arrived ill, the facilitators only acknowledged their condition by mentioning their own sickness, despite the participant's clear need to stay home due to the severity of their illness. This led to other members distancing themselves from the sick individual, exacerbating the tension. When the situation became particularly toxic, the facilitator publicly reprimanded both parties, a method I found questionable, as it was evident they intended to have a private discussion but hesitated to do so. The group's strong connections meant that even minor issues could disrupt their cohesion. There were times when establishing boundaries was crucial, particularly regarding inappropriate behaviour and emotional expressions. The facilitators managed these situations competently, depending on their severity. In my critical reflection, I emphasize a specific incident that could have been addressed more effectively.

The facilitators were instrumental in enhancing the participants' self-confidence, which subsequently increased their enthusiasm, particularly during physically demanding activities. However, the ambiguity surrounding the session's location resulted in a sense of disconnection for some participants, potentially impeding their overall engagement.

In conclusion, my direct observations underscored the significance of clear communication, adaptability, and sustaining high energy levels throughout the activities. Furthermore, I noted several challenges related to the location of sessions, the impact of illness within a group setting, and staff coordination. The varied strategies implemented by the facilitators were crucial in influencing the group's dynamics, ultimately fostering a more unified and experience for all participants.

Questions of Practice

This is my outline of a collection of Questions of Practice that I formulated during my placement with Hijinx:

How can we create a safe space for everyone to express themselves? What protections are in place? What's my role in the group? Who is represented, and who benefits? What motivates participants to join—obligation, enjoyment, encouragement from tutors, or career goals?

What steps can I take to design and implement my applied theatre practice while being creative and addressing practical and ethical issues? How can I show that I can work well in a professional setting while being

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with Hijinx:

What steps can I take to design and implement my applied theatre practice while being creative and addressing practical and ethical issues? How can I show that I can work well in a professional setting while being self-directed? Am I disrupting the environment? Have I seen progress in my participants? How can I best support them? Are they motivated just because they've invested money in this experience?

Considering New Participants:

Do they fit in with the group? Will they positively challenge the group? What skills and experiences do they bring? What are their abilities and understanding? Are they high-functioning or low-functioning? What are they hoping to gain from Hijinx? Can Hijinx meet their expectations? If they join, would they prefer to start working immediately or wait? Would Hijinx suggest they begin work right away or hold off?

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Supporting Literture

Intersectionality and Embodiment in Disability Studies

Disability in Acting

Disability in Actor Training

Authentic Representation and Inclusive Training

Training actors with learning differences such as Down's syndrome, autism, and dyslexia presents distinct challenges and opportunities. This review explores the interplay of disability and the physical embodiment of these experiences within actor training. It draws on insights from the publication Intersectionality and Embodiment: Important Issues for Disability Studies (Watermeyer, B. and Swartz, L., 2024), Down's Syndrome Association (Down's Syndrome Association, 2021), Changing the Image of Disability: Why Authentic Representation is So Important for the Disabled Community (Business Disability Forum, 2023), and The Applied Theatre Reader (Prentki, T. and Preston, S. 2009).

Intersectionality and Embodiment in Disability Studies

Intersectionality and Embodiment in Disability Studies

Intersectionality explores how different identities, including disability, shape both personal and shared experiences. As it states in the Intersectionality and Embodiment: Important Issues for Disability Studies (Watermeyer, B. and Swartz, L., 2024) "we must not underestimate the complexity brought by disability's infinite diversity of forms of embodiment". Embodiment refers to the physical expression of disability, which requires individuals to navigate societal expectations related to appearance, behaviour, and capabilities. For these individuals, their embodied experiences—covering elements such as movement, speech, and cognitive abilities—play a crucial role in their training processes.

Disability in Acting

Disabled Theatre confronts societal norms regarding ability, utilising theatre as a means of empowerment. It critiques traditional roles of disabled performers and advocates for a revaluation of disability in performance and representation. The main argument suggests that theatre can promote both individual and collective liberation, going beyond simple representation. The authors contend that disabled actors should operate free from directorial constraints, as emphasised by the statement:

"... the provision of freedom and agency that enables the actor to appear, without the instructions and corrections from our director..." (2015:41p). This viewpoint fosters an egalitarian environment where disabled actors interact with audiences on equal footing, challenging paternalistic views of disability. Disabled Theatre aligns with disability studies, which regard disability as a social construct that hinders inclusion. It disrupts able-bodied performance norms, creating new opportunities for disabled actors to redefine their audience interactions.

Disability in Actor Training

Specialised training methods are crucial for actors with Down's syndrome, autism, and dyslexia. A publication from the Down's Syndrome Association (Down's Syndrome Association, 2021) emphasises the importance of customised training programs that prioritise communication, physical expression, and social skills, thereby challenging restrictive stereotypes in their 'training and support' sessions. Likewise, actors with learning differences can thrive by leveraging their strengths, including meticulous attention to detail and distinctive viewpoints, despite potential difficulties with social interactions and emotional expression. Hijinx's training academies recognise and cultivate these strengths enabling their actors to refine their unique performance style.

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Authentic Representation and Inclusive Training

The initiative Changing the Image of Disability (Business Disability Forum, 2023) highlights the essential importance of accurate representation of disabilities in the arts. For performers with Down's syndrome, autism, and dyslexia, inclusive training environments are crucial for fostering self-expression and challenging existing stereotypes. Authentic representation entails portraying characters that reflect the actual experiences of individuals with disabilities, allowing actors to share their unique perspectives on stage. In the inaugural edition of the Applied Theatre Reader, Liselle Terret shares insights from two participants with learning differences who took part in a self-advocacy project in her section titled Who's got the power? It is states,

"Both participants commented that reflecting on the process had enabled them to gain more of an insight into themselves and that they would use this as a way of challenging the constant prejudices and ignorance's experienced by people with learning disabilities that has been normalised with our society, that they both still experience in their everyday lives." (2009, p. 343).

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Conclusion

Actor training for individuals with Down's syndrome, autism, and dyslexia must emphasise inclusivity, flexibility, and authenticity. Recognising the intersections of these disabilities and the value of lived experiences allows training programs to provide disabled performers with opportunities to develop their skills and improve the representation of diverse voices in theatre.

Ethical Considerations

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While Hijinx demonstrated strong ethical practices, not all aspects aligned with the principles outlined by Sadeghi-Yekta and Prendergast in "Creating a Code" (2022, p. 228). Continuous consent is a crucial element of this ethical framework; however, Hijinx showed some complacency in enforcing verbal consent during participant interactions. Consent should be viewed as an ongoing process that adapts to the project's and participants' needs. Implementing strategies such as verbal consent, attendance records, or, when suitable, written consent ensures participants maintain their rights to make informed decisions (2022, p. 230). It is essential that consent is obtained in a manner that reflects the associated risks, which should be collaboratively discussed to align any potential challenges or discomforts with the goals of development and transformation (2022, p. 231).

I began integrating this approach into my practice by tailoring methods to meet participants' specific needs while ensuring open communication, which is essential. It is vital to communicate boundaries and limitations (2022, p. 233), "We must also communicate boundaries and limitations." (2022, p. 233). A notable example in Hijinx where a "shift power dynamics, whether within the development of a project or between performers and audience," was in one memorable session involved a tutor engaging participants with script work aimed at enhancing literacy and boosting confidence. Participants discovered their ability to tackle the challenges presented by the tutor, which included learning and performing a scene. Intentionally shift power dynamics and encourage participants to step outside their comfort zones.

In conclusion the principles outlined by Sadeghi-Yekta and Prendergast emphasize the importance of creating an environment where individuals feel valued, empowered, and respected, rather than merely protecting them. Ethical practices in applied theatre should be seen as a dynamic process, customized to the unique needs of each project and participant.



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Summary of Experience

Hijinx is a leading inclusive theatre company that showcases exceptional performances by learning disabled and/or autistic artists in theatre and film. Their key initiatives include theatre productions, community performances, training programs also known as 'Academies', business communication training, film production, and casting opportunities for these artists. Hijinx actively engages with the wider community through outreach projects, aiming to raise awareness and promote social change, ensuring that artists of all backgrounds have an equal platform.
Hijinx Academies offer specialised training for these artists, focusing on skills like audition techniques, improvisation, dance, and acting. Their aim is to build a network of actors with learning disabilities and/or autism in Wales, preparing them for opportunities in theatre, film, and television. The Academies encourage self-expression and personal growth while tackling challenges related to accessibility and representation.
The West Academy, part of Hijinx Academies, has 12 participants (8 male, 4 female) with varying abilities and disabilities. Performance training involves various experts, such as playback conductors, aerial instructors, casting and promotion specialists, and choreographers. These professionals provide unique perspectives

The West Academy, part of Hijinx Academies, has 12 participants (8 male, 4 female) with varying abilities and disabilities. Performance training involves various experts, such as playback conductors, aerial instructors, casting and promotion specialists, and choreographers. These professionals provide unique perspectives on making the arts more accessible.

Observing these experts greatly enhanced my experience by providing essential skills and diverse methods for supporting actors with learning disabilities and autism. This involved adapting communication techniques for each individual, using visual aids and sensory cues to improve learning, and developing tailored strategies for emotional regulation and focus. Additionally, I gained insights into fostering an inclusive environment that encourages self-expression, while maintaining a patient, flexible, and compassionate approach to each actor's unique journey.

Instances of neglect for these principles were observed within the West Academy Hijinx, despite this being the intended objective.

During my placement at Hijinx, I gained valuable insights into the critical role that effective communication, adaptability, and dynamic energy play in successfully engaging participants. The facilitators utilised a diverse array of strategies aimed at fostering a supportive and nurturing environment for all involved. However, they encountered several challenges, including health-related issues among participants and the logistical difficulties posed by varying session locati

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