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An Essential Guide
from Literature Wales

Delivering Inclusive Online Workshops

This document offers some practical suggestions for anyone delivering online writing workshops to help make these as inclusive and welcoming as possible. It adopts the core principles recommended by Kings College London (Melcher, 2020) as a foundation for good practice and considers the practical, social and communication aspects of online workshops, rather than specific content. The suggestions are focused towards inclusive practice for neurodivergent participants. Neurodiversity is a variation of human neurocognitive functioning. If you would like to learn more about neuro-diversities, learning differences and cognitive variance, there is a list of resources at the end of this document.

Inclusion

There is no one definition of what we mean by inclusivity. In terms of workshop facilitation, it concerns how sessions are structured and delivered to promote a sense of belonging. It embraces the concept of diversity as part of the human condition and recognises different types of gifts and abilities through respecting people for who they are. Inclusion has been described as a 'state of becoming' (Nutbrown and Clough, 2013). It is aspirational; something that we need to keep working towards – a constant process of reflecting and adapting how we facilitate in order to recognise barriers to learning and break these down to create a sense of belonging for every participant. It includes guide planning, delivering, assessing / evaluating and general interactions with participants.

Recommendations

There are three key recommendations to keep in mind when planning, delivering, assessing or evaluating workshops and just generally interacting with participants in online sessions:

1. **Be Specific:** Give clear and specific details about any expectations, requirements, activities and timings for the sessions. This enables participants to plan in advance how best to use their time and energy. It also avoids confusion and misunderstanding and reduces any anxieties or worries that participants might have which could impact their enjoyment and engagement.
2. **Be Transparent:** Give focused and explicit instructions / information about the structure of the sessions or what the aims of a particular reading / writing activity involve. Avoid using jargon or idioms which could lead to confusion. Knowing what to expect and why you are doing a particular activity helps everyone understand how to best participate and minimises the possibility of distractions for all involved.
3. **Be Mindful:** Be aware that facilitating inclusion does not mean focussing on the 'problem' or 'deficit' in the individual person. Neuro-diversities are part of the person, a different way of experiencing the world. While using remote platforms has meant that people do not face the obstacles of travel and venue access, there is still a lot of misunderstanding and stigma surrounding learning differences, neuro-diversities, mental health challenges and hidden disabilities. Participants may have caring responsibilities, chronic pain or fatigue, different accents, or levels of English-language ease. They may well be joining online sessions from spaces not designed or dedicated to writing, learning and communicating and may face problems with reliable internet connections / technology.

Things to consider before the first meeting:

Invitations, Announcements and Notices
These present an excellent opportunity to encourage people who might be interested in attending that you want to be welcoming and inclusive. You can do this by asking people if they have any accessibility needs, or if there is anything that they might require support or assistance with, in order to participate.

Mobile platforms like Zoom, Teams and Google Meetings have built in captioning for people with hearing or attention support needs and participants might be using their own assistive technologies to access online information. It is always worth checking in advance to ask about how you can offer support. Some people may need to have a carer or personal assistant join the sessions, others might have difficulties sitting in a chair or focussing on a screen for long periods. Aim to create a supportive environment where people can feel and relaxed and welcome.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline Example	Aspirational Example
Encourage participants to discuss any support / accessibility needs or any potential difficulties they might encounter, before the session.	When publicizing the workshops, invite participants to contact you about how best to support them.	During the first meeting, outline how former participants have engaged with you regards additional needs or concerns. At the end of the session, ask if any participants would like a five-minute meeting 1:1, or if they prefer, send an email to discuss any concerns.

Timing
Problems with internet connections and technology can interfere with the best laid plans. Some participants may have issues with sitting for long periods and we all benefit from spending time away from screens. Ensure that you include sufficient time to accommodate technical problems, comfort breaks, giving / receiving feedback, listening to comments, suggestions, or explanations and just for general / group chat.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline Example	Aspirational Example
When planning the workshops, ensure you include time for breaks and unexpected delays .	Before the session, send participants a schedule outlining approximate timings for workshop activities and when breaks are scheduled to take place around these.	At the start of each session, remind participants what activities are planned and when breaks are scheduled to take place. Invite participants to ask any questions and reassure them that they can take a break whenever they need to. Be flexible with timings through being mindful of

		participants' energy and concentration levels and be ready to break earlier / later in the session if people would like this.

First Session:

As more of our lives are lived remotely, time to meet up with others, share and connect is an important aspect for overall wellbeing, as well as helping members to feel welcome and comfortable. Aim to include extra time for introductions during the first session (or if you are running a single workshop). However, try to avoid vague questions or social platitudes which can cause confusion for some neurodivergent people, who may have difficulties in understanding or recognising social cues or body language.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline Example	Aspirational Example
Greet everyone and make them feel welcome	Hello, how are you?	Has anything good happened today / this week?

Although participants should have been sent details in advance, some people might be joining later, or may just need reminding and clarification. Take time at the start of the workshop to clarify the structure of the session and any future workshops and check that everyone has received or has access to any resources, information and handouts you are using.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline example	Aspirational example
Ensure there is a clear structure to the session.	Today we will be spending some time looking at some poems, discussing these and then having a go at writing our own poems.	In the first half of today's session, we are going to do three things. First, we will read the poems on the handout. Secondly, we will talk about these and share our ideas and responses. Thirdly, we will have a go at writing our own poems before we have a break at about 11:30.

Ask if participants are familiar with how to use various functions like the chat box and how to mute / unmute their microphones. Turn off any apps and open tabs that may create noises, notifications or banners and encourage participants to do the same. Check that everyone feels ready and happy to participate and let people know if the session is being recorded.

Inclusivity	Baseline Example	Aspirational Example

Recommendation		
Ensure participants understand the different ways they can engage with and contribute to the workshop	Please mute your microphone if you are not speaking in the workshop. This helps to minimise disturbances through background noise. You can use the chat function or raise your hand if you have any questions.	Does everyone know how to mute their microphones? If we all mute our microphones when we are not speaking, this helps to minimise any distractions from background noise. If there is any background noise on my own audio do let me know. There are a number of ways of taking part in the session. You can type in the chat box, use the 'raise hand' emoji or just physically raise your hand - and I will invite you to unmute your microphone. If we are having a general discussion then I will prompt you to unmute beforehand.

Some people might need additional time to change the settings on their device to suit their needs, such as adjusting colours, contrast or using screen navigation tools. Although participants have more control over the space, they are in than if the workshop were taking place face to face in a venue, they may still prefer to have the curtains drawn or the lights out or need some time to adjust their seating. Not everyone is comfortable turning their cameras on, so encourage participants that this is fine and remember to check in regularly by asking everyone if there is anything they are confused about or do not understand.

Materials / Resources

Participants with learning differences, neuro-diversities, and disabilities may be hypersensitive to sensory stimuli as well as needing more energy to stay focused and concentrate. Aim to minimize distractions by using plain backgrounds, blurring effects or digitally produced backgrounds that have simple lines. If you are using any handouts, offer large text versions (14pt+) in simple sans serif fonts (such as Arial or Calibri) and be aware that black text on a white background can contribute to visual stress. It would also be a good idea to also prepare a dyslexia-friendly document.

If you are using video / audio media, think about whether you need this. What does it add to the information / activity? If you are already using a PowerPoint or screensharing, then video / audio could be an additional and unnecessary distraction, with the potential to disrupt internet speeds and connections. If you are planning on using any media with loud noises, bright, flashing lights or visual distractions, such as clashing colours and moving texts, always offer a warning beforehand.

Throughout the session remember to check in regularly, particularly after any breaks.

Activities / Exercises

Give clear instructions or guidelines about how to approach an activity, how much time to spend and what the aims or purpose of the activity are.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline Example	Aspirational Example
Give time expectations / outlines for reading / writing tasks, understanding some people may need longer. Be specific about relevance of the task.	Try not to spend longer than 5 minutes reading the example. Afterwards we will talk about it before we write for 15 minutes.	Don't spend too much time on the reading. About 5 minutes. It's only a starting point to think about how the writer approaches the topic / uses dialogue / images etc. There will be more time to explore the subject later. When we've shared our ideas, we are going to have a go at writing something that uses description / dialogue. We'll spend around 15 minutes on our own writing.

Discussion

When asking questions, be mindful of presenting too much information. Following a conversation, presentation, plus chat box and the challenges of judging social cues from typed messages or faces on screen can be overwhelming for a neurodivergent person to process. Some participants may be following the captions on screen, which may be slightly delayed and are not perfect. So, aim to be very clear, ask only one question at a time and give participants sufficient time to process and clarify their thinking / ideas.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline Example	Aspirational Example
In group discussions, give time for processing questions and time for thinking to formulate answers.	What do people think about the ending of the story? I'll give you a minute or so to think about it.	I'm going to ask a question based on the reading *x*, specifically, the end of the story. I'll give everyone two minutes to think and then I will ask for people to start noting down their initial thoughts and responses. You can put these in the chat, or raise your

		hand.
		Don't worry if your thoughts are not yet clear or polished. Just note some initial ideas and responses at this point that we can share / discuss.

To encourage discussion and underscore the sense of welcome and inclusion, reassure participants that there is no pressure to speak or respond, but that everyone's ideas are valid and interesting because we are all approaching the activity from a unique lived experience.

Inclusivity Recommendation	Baseline example	Aspirational example
Encourage participation and emphasise that there are no wrong answers.	What do you think about *x* poem? Does anyone have any ideas? There are no right answers.	Does anyone have any thoughts or ideas about *x* poem? There are no right answers. How we respond is very subjective to our own individual perspectives and any poems / texts are open to debates. Also, are there any questions anyone wants to ask about *x* poem or anything else? There are no stupid questions either.

Fear of sounding stupid in front of strangers is a source of anxiety for nearly everyone at some point, especially for people who find it challenging to understand social cues and conventions, which can be further confused in online discussions. Aim to reduce these barriers to participation by offering clear explanations and repeatedly encouraging and emphasizing the validity of everyone's ideas and experiences.

When facilitating sessions, remember to look at the chat and watch for raised hands, then clearly nominate which people will speak and in which order if there is more than one question. This enables participants to focus on one input at a time, which helps people to stay focused and allows any discussion to flow more smoothly. If anyone starts off by saying something like… *'This may sound like a stupid question, but ….'* answer this by first emphasizing, *'That's a good question, thank you (name) for raising it….'*

Respect each other's views and opinions. It's always OK to not know and to seek clarification.

Feedback, Sharing and Reflection

Anxieties about sharing our writing, or reading in front of people, can present a significant barrier to participation for many people, especially those who process information differently. It can be particularly anxiety provoking to prompt someone to read aloud without advance notice, so always invite people from the group to read and stress that nobody has to do this if they don't want to. When responding to a piece of writing that a participant shares, be specific, focus on the positives and give participants some concrete suggestions about ideas to try to make the piece even better

Inclusivity recommendation	Baseline example	Aspirational example
Give positive feedback and offer practical suggestions for any improvements.	There are some really good images in this poem. Think about working on the structure to give the poem greater clarity.	I really like the way you have used images of the sea to convey a sense of foreboding in this poem. Well done. If you want to make this poem even stronger, you could think about using couplets to give a clearer structure and make it easier to read.

When seeking feedback or reflection from participants at the end of the workshop, try to pose any questions so that they do not merely prompt yes / no answers. Feedback and reflection offer valuable points for future change and the best way to learn what participants want is to ask. Some online forms are not able to work with assistive technologies that support reading and writing, so aim to offer flexible ways to capture feedback, such as inviting people to respond in chat or send an email after the session. Many people can find forms off-putting and the closed-end responses of questions like, '*Were the resources in this workshop accessible?*' can make it appear like a tick-box exercise that will not result in change.

Accessibility and inclusion are separate but related activities. Accessibility is a key attribute of inclusive design, removing barriers that make it harder for some people to take part in activities. It can be context specific and concerns the qualities and practicalities that make an experience open for all people. Inclusion is a principle or mindset that draws on the full range of human diversity when designing and delivering activities. Embedding inclusivity practices into workshop planning and delivery benefits all participants.

Further resources

https://autismwales.org/en/
https://www.autism.org.uk/
https://www.auberginecafe.co.uk/
https://www.bdadyslexia.org.uk/
https://ndnetwork.org/wales.html

Books
- *Autism and Asperger Syndrome in Adults* – Dr Luke Beardon
- *Stim: An Autistic Anthology* – ed. by Lizzie (Hux) Huxley-Jones
- *Neurotribes* – Steve Silberman
- *The Electricity of Every Living Thing: A Woman's Walk in the Wild to Find Her Way Home* – Katherine May
- *The Autistic Alice* – Joanne Limburg
- *The Girl with the Curly Hair* – Alis Rowe

Blogs / Vlogs
- https://autisticnotweird.com/
- https://autisticandunapologetic.com/
- https://katefoxwriter.wordpress.com
- https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Bk0GbW8xgvTgQlheNG5uw
- https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCzske-KMAJYQn84rz6oD_yA
- https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC2_a05o1pW4fr9SzlyMv8OA

References:

'Getting started with accessibility and inclusion' (12 March 2021*), JISC* Available at:
https://www.jisc.ac.uk/guides/getting-started-with-accessibility-and-inclusion

Melcher, Miranda (2020) *Teaching to Include Everyone: A Practical Guide for Online Teaching of Neurodiverse and Disabled Students* Available at: https://www.cientificolatino.com/other-resources

Nutbrown, C. and Peter Clough *(2013) Inclusion in the Early Years,* London: Sage

Sensory differences - a guide for all audiences', (n.d.), *National Autistic Society* Available at:
https://www.autism.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/topics/sensory-differences/sensory-differences/all-audiences

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