

Persons with Disabilities: From Principles to Practice, *Part II*

by Peter Noteboom - first published on the GLP blog March 24, 2014

I am a visual learner so by preference (teaching and facilitating in the way I like to learn) I tend to prioritize visual learning when designing learning experiences: showing what I mean using diagrams and pictures, drawing on visual metaphors to invite new connections, and calling on learners to draw tables, flow charts, and



diagrams that demonstrate causal or relational links from one idea or action to the next. When facilitating small and large group sessions, I like to invite learners to document their idea on cards and post them, either in a web chart or on a wall calendar or timeline - the more colors the better. My experience is that most learners appreciate these practices, but not all.

To my regret, as a result I have been caught flat-footed by participants with visual impairment. Even though one participant came prepared with the learning design printed in Braille so that she was able to follow along without visual cues, the learning tasks did not, in the main, invite her to put her best foot forward. Even though another participant was mobile because of a motorized chair, the walk'n-talks, the shifting partners of 2-2 or trios, often demanded accommodations that unduly brought attention to him and how to accommodate those small group dialogue practices. And even though a third participant expressed her thoughts and ideas with great wisdom and clarity, I found myself learning forward, squinting, and bending over as if listening to a child because of her speech impairment.

I need to stretch my understanding and practice of inclusion well beyond a minimal definition of seeing to it that every voice is heard. So what does inclusion in this inclusive-of-persons-with-disabilities mean? What does it mean to demonstrate respect and safety for each and all? What does engagement look like? How will we design learning events so that all participants, including those persons with disabilities, are able to tell, show and demonstrate how smart they are?

Practical Tips for More Inclusion

Designing and facilitating learning events with persons with disabilities in mind is a gift, an art, and a science. While not expert, here are a few practical tips for designing and facilitating learning that take into account fuller inclusion.

Assessment

- Make the effort to find out in advance who is coming with disabilities. Including a question in your Learning Needs and Resources Assessment can demonstrate both that you are ready, aware, and willing to respond, and that you welcome and encourage their full participation. The question works best when it is placed as part of an overall assessment process, not all that different from asking if there are any special diets to take into account.
- When appropriate, ask if any are self-excluding themselves from the learning process and event because of a disability. Checking with the organizers in advance can again encourage fuller participation. Asking the question demonstrates an interest, concern and desire to see everyone fully participate. This attitude of openness may also influence positively other aspects of the program.
- Once you know who is coming, do the research you need to find out how they like to learn best. Inviting persons with disabilities to tell you what works can help increase their feeling of control and involvement, key factors that may lead to their success. Be sure to take these into account during your design process.

Design

- Examine the room layout. Is there room for a wheelchair to move from the circle of chairs, to working tables, and back? Will the visually impaired person feel comfortable with seeing aids, including dogs, in the room? What else do you need to consider in the room layout to practice fuller inclusion? What about accessibility?
- Design or adjust your learning objectives with your learners and their abilities in mind.
- The learning tasks that result from those learning objectives are best written from the perspective of the learners. So consider in advance your step by step instructions to ensure that persons with disabilities know how they can participate, and who will work together to be successful. As the facilitator, do a “dry run” in advance with everyone in mind (Can that wheelchair get to the necessary location? Will the visually impaired person get the full weight of the research and theory, and alone or together can they learn by doing with

others?) Consider sharing the learning tasks in advance, quietly, perhaps during a break, so there is more confidence and predictability in the room.

- Customize the production of the learning materials. A complete learning design helps all learners to see and participate. (Do you have the facilities to print the materials in Braille when needed; do you know where to go? Is there an appropriate reliance on visuals, or descriptive text that describes the visuals to ensure everyone can participate?)

Facilitation

- Consider your facilitation stance. How will your voice and body language affirm and support the learning for each and all, without discrimination or sending unintended signals?
- Choose the best place to sit and stand: Does it work best to be close to the person with speech impairment to avoid asking for repetition, or signalling unintentional body language?
- When setting the learning task, be sure to consider that the task is clear and that how the task will be accomplished is clear for each and all.
- Intervene when you see and feel exclusion. Check in quietly at the break, consult before the start of the event, or solicit feedback at the end of the event that surfaces concerns of exclusion and encourages everyone to respond.
- Be sure to celebrate the successes and insights of each and all, without discrimination.
- Honour and name the efforts of each and all.

What tips would you add to this list, both in principle, and from your own experience?