




All images throughout this article are from Sense National Inclusive Dance Programme. Photos: Mike Pinches. © Sense Arts.

# **Making Sense: Connection, collaboration and creativity in inclusive practice**

**Hayley Graham**, one of twenty dance artists with Sense charity's National Inclusive Dance Programme 2022-23, looks back on her experience together with Rebecca Randall, Sense's Resident Dance Artist and Stephanie Tyrell its Head of Arts. Here they describe a delicate practice of building trust between those who create, those who lead and those who support a dance session to reveal artistic potential.



I'm Hayley, one of many artists and assistant artists up and down the country delivering the programme. I work in Rotherham, a small town in South Yorkshire, alongside Amelia Mather and Elicia Yeardeley. We deliver sessions at Sense centres and in the community. I have been freelancing in dance for several years now, and have been increasingly drawn to specialising in inclusive practice. During the lockdown, I began training in Makaton (a unique language programme that uses symbols, signs and speech to enable people to communicate) and this further fueled my interest. I've worked with Phoenix Dance Theatre, Northern School of Contemporary Dance and Yorkshire Dance, facilitating inclusive sessions and sessions for disabled people. I have also worked as a support worker in a learning disability centre. This experience has proved invaluable to my practice.

One of our regular Thursday sessions in 2022 took place on the hottest day of the year. Our usual space isn't available today... I ask: "Is it okay if we use the craft room, please?" There's a sink, large table, craft supplies. I glance at the dancers, already gathered in the small space. I smile and say "Yes, we can make it work."

The hour passes quickly. We have been working together for a few weeks and are finding our rhythm, finding the connections between each other. Blue silk floats, swaying in time with the



fabric, and we find the breeze within our bodies and the room. Our fingers squeeze ice, we laugh with shock at the temperature, we notice how our muscles tense and react to the cold. We consider the heat surrounding us, small movement, considered movement, we preserve and use energy wisely. There were some beautiful moments today. In this corner of Rotherham, we have found a home, within our space and with each other. Making a connection together has been the key to unlocking creativity.

For me, I have learnt it is crucial to meet people where they are at, geographically, physically, >>







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emotionally or artistically. We so often see potential in the people we work with and then want them to come to us: “Try this new thing, show me this, let’s all go here and do my idea”, we say. But this is not a one-sided communication: I am coming into your space, how can I come to you and let you know that where you are now, exactly as you are, is more than enough. I try to use our initial sessions to learn about the dancers. Wherever they are, is exactly where we start from.

I believe this approach supports trust to build between myself and dancers. We learn each other’s ‘language’. Once we are communicating (I use this term encompassing all communications, whether it be dance, touch, sign, expression etc.) then we can begin to explore those creative boundaries. When people are listened to and safe, they are more willing to try different creative ideas, to explore something new.

One dance maker was very unsure about dance at first and required encouragement to stay in the space with us. Every week we worked together to develop a connection. We started from where he was at (simply being in the space) and built up from there at his pace. One session after about 12 weeks, he made verbal communication with us and requested a specific song. Following that came smiles, more physical engagement and an understanding I was listening to and valuing his needs and interests. Making that initial connection opened up an opportunity to create dance together. Steph Tyrrell, Sense’s Head of Arts, says ‘Our dance programme is about finding new talent in our services and celebrating the creativity of the people we support. Working in depth with local dance artists is key to ensure we’re connecting with a wide range of people, and we’re delighted with the progress made.’



Ideally, support staff, artists and dancers should all be working in a collaboration, all as important as each other. Remembering support staff in your delivery is key. They often know the dancers best, making their knowledge invaluable. As artists, we usually have expectations of what we want staff to do in our sessions. To give it their all, to join in,



**Sense Arts launched their National Inclusive Dance Programme (NIDP) in 2022. The NIDP is led by Artistic Director Lisa Simpson alongside Resident Dance Artist Rebecca Randall and a whole team of freelance artists across the UK. Lisa has observed that ‘Many people with complex disabilities have not yet been given the opportunity to realise their creative potential.’ This aligns with the charity’s aim ‘no one left out of life’ and drives a desire to highlight the creative contributions made by disabled adults who access Sense services. Starting with dance, Sense are soon to be expanding the national programme to include music and visual arts.**

to provide extra support to those who need it, but they are not trained dance artists, so what can we do to support them? How can we make their day easier? I find it helpful to make my artistic intentions clear to the staff, so they understand why I’m doing what I’m doing. In one session, we moved the start time back by 15 minutes. Such a small thing, but it made a huge difference as the staff were not having to rush lunch and could arrive feeling more relaxed.

Music is a big part of my practice and a great way to connect with people. If we are having fun at the end of a session, the people we support and

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staff can choose the music. Inviting staff to feel part of the session and just as valued as the dancers is key. The dancers gain confidence to join in when they have familiar staff around them modelling engagement. I feel so grateful for the support staff in sessions – their commitment and energy has been a huge support. Being able to work in collaboration has definitely had a positive impact on the progress of the dancers.

Reflecting back after a year on the project, it is amazing to see how far we have come. Being part of Sense Arts NIDP has reinforced for me how important it is to build a relationship of equals between artists, care staff and dancers, each with a valid contribution. We’ve developed trust between us. It means that now when I come in with new ideas to try together, we say yes! The dancers can push their personal boundaries and have fun with dance because they feel supported and our connection unlocks an expanse of creative dance potential.

#### Info

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