

mob-shop



Mob-Shop: Evaluation

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Introduction

Exploring the concept of mobility shops and how they sit in the cultural consciousness of disabled experiences, Mob-Shop takes a bold new approach to mobility aids and how they are perceived. The outcome of the project so far has been an accessible yet deeply thought-provoking range of creative outputs, but it isn't only the public-facing elements of this venture that have been exceptional. Right from the beginning, Mob-Shop has explored radical new ways of working with disabled creatives - not only facilitating more inclusive practice, but also making a powerful statement about the often unacknowledged lived experiences of disabled people in our society.

At present, disabled people often have to make their unique selves fit within a generic, clinical selection of mobility aids. In the same way, disabled people in work often have no choice but to make what can be fluctuating health and access needs fit within inaccessible working practices that for too long have been considered the 'norm'. Through Mob-Shop, both of these concepts have been held accountable, challenged, and transcended.

Instead of trying to make themselves fit within ableist systems, at detriment to their own wellbeing, those at all levels of the project have used invaluable skills and insight to explore how to make these norms fit around themselves instead. The

result, in terms of both Mob-Shop's working practice and the outcomes, have been remarkable.

Working Practice

Proactive Accommodations

Although reasonable adjustments should be seen as the bare minimum when it comes to inclusive collaboration, disabled people in all sectors face widespread issues in securing the things they need to work in a safe and sustainable way. The amount of administration required to arrange these adjustments can be great, and more often than not, the responsibility tends to fall on disabled people themselves - taking a toll on what are often already depleted energy levels.

Such concerns were, however, fast alleviated for those involved with Mob-Shop. From the initial outreach emails to ongoing meetings and discussions, organisers were not only proactive with discussing individual needs and adjustments, but there were many elements that were implemented as a baseline across the board. These include (but are not limited to):

- Taking the lead from individuals on their preferred meeting times and methods
- Transcribing all spoken communication during online meetings to ensure all information is captured and retained
- Pre-emptively budgeting for access costs at all levels of the project with a clear process for requesting an increase if further support is required.

Flexibility and access were a fundamental component of Mob-Shop from the get-go and, as the project progressed, this made coming to more expansive decisions about inclusive working practices further down the line even more straightforward.

In relation to this point, ongoing communication was essential; especially as the project and timescales evolved. Although this evolution was sparked by the organisers taking their lead from the commissioned artists and adapting processes to become more accessible for them, this in itself posed a new challenge to negotiate. It was vital that everybody involved was always updated about Mob-Shop's progression, but keeping on top of digital forms of communication can in itself be (or become) inaccessible for disabled people, especially those working with limited energy or cognitive dysfunction.

Because of this, a particular concern of the director was how sending additional emails might add to an existing list of demands on the artist – especially as, on reflection, they felt their initial outreach documents and brief could have been made more concise or included bullet point summaries. Therefore, organisers also utilised voice notes and WhatsApp messages for the artists who find these methods more manageable, to share information more succinctly. This evolution once again demonstrates the organisers' commitment to learning from the artists' lived experiences and adapting working processes accordingly.

At present, this level of commitment to accommodating individual needs is rarely seen in projects and working practices outside of the disability community.

However, a stance of this kind can have a transformative impact on the experiences of disabled creatives – something that has been clearly echoed by the creatives (and indeed myself) commissioned as part of Mob-Shop. Being proactive about accommodations and reasonable adjustments in this way meant that discussing access needs became an open discussion, not only tolerated but encouraged, and in doing so had an overwhelmingly positive influence on the overall project too.

Crip Time

One such accommodation that warrants further discussion here is the concept of Crip Time. As defined by the Critical Disability Studies Collective, crip time is ‘a concept arising from disabled experience that addresses the ways that disabled/chronically ill and neurodivergent people experience time (and space) differently than able-body minded folk.’ In this context, crip time once again challenges the traditional working practice that many disabled people must make personal sacrifices to accommodate - rather than making ourselves unwell to fit within the traditional model of timeframes and deadlines, these timeframes and deadlines became dynamic based on the needs and feedback of all involved. If Mob-Shop wanted to get to the heart of the issues it was exploring, and collaborate with the people who know these experiences most intimately, it was essential that the project was able to accommodate any health fluctuations and/or setbacks from those involved - in essence, it must be able to work on Crip Time.

In practice, this meant that the internal timeframe for the project and for the physical output were reviewed on an ongoing basis. While none of the artists explicitly requested deadline extensions, the director took their cue from lulls in communication from those involved and sensed that disability-related struggles (especially the additional burden of navigating the pandemic as a disabled person at this time) were posing challenges and setbacks. Every artist experienced limited capacity at least once throughout the duration of the project, and so the timescale was reviewed and adjusted accordingly, with key dates pushed back whenever it was felt that was necessary.

This action was not only mindful of the time-benefits of extended deadlines, but also the pace at which the artists worked. By scheduling less work to complete in more time, those involved were able to progress their work in a healthier and more sustainable way – avoiding the pitfalls of the ‘boom and bust’ cycle which can come from physical overexertion to meet rigid expectations. The ‘payback’ from booming-and-busting in this way can lead to a significant decrease in wellbeing, something which is sadly still normalised in general working practice for those in creative industries, but this barrier was mindfully side-stepped by Mob-Shop.

Again, in a world dominated by non-disabled people and less-flexible ways of working, delays resulting from this approach might be interpreted as a shortcoming, a sign that success (in the ableist ways success is typically perceived) had not been achieved here. However, the altered time frames of Mob-Shop were not a

weakness. Instead, they were an act of defiance. They communicated a clear message that no timescale or deadline would be prioritised above any individual's capacity or wellbeing – and even with all of this in mind, it's a credit to the director that through their organisation and ongoing communication efforts, the project never stopped moving forward toward the desired outcomes. Mob-Shop ran on Crip Time, and was made all the better for it.

Flexible Expectations

Related to the above point regarding time flexibility, flexible expectations of the creatives' output were not only tolerated, but again, proactively used to shape the process. Although each artist had a desired outcome in mind at the beginning of the project, the ever-present demands of managing disability meant that some of these initial aims no longer seemed a feasible option for some of the creatives involved.

It was of utmost importance to the director that artists knew that they were valued and that space would be made for them and their work, whatever shape this may take. As part of this, a 'possible outcomes for collaboration' document was circulated mid-way through the timescale. This document was designed to suggest some alternative ways the artists could still be involved and contribute to the overall project, even if disability-related challenges disrupted their initial plans. These suggestions included:

- Showing pre-existing work from past creative projects

- Exhibiting the planning process of their work (such as their proposal) rather than the final piece
- Facilitating an entirely different and more accessible piece of work of the artist's choosing.

Most notably, this document also made clear that choosing not to produce any physical work at all for this exhibition was also an option. It was recognised that artists may prefer to invest further time and resources into their work to realise it to the extent they would like to see it, rather than exhibit it before they felt it was ready simply to meet the current deadline. Equally, it was recognised that an artist may not produce any work at all for this project, at any point in time, and that this would under no circumstances be regarded as a negative outcome.

This document made clear that regardless of how or whether the work was delivered, each creative would still be featured as a lead artist, and credit given to their work and practice as an important reference point for the project. Indeed, adaptations made by the artists in this manner throughout the creative process could once again offer invaluable insight into the subject matter of the entire project... a concept demonstrated beautifully with Raisa Kabir's commission.

Raisa set out to exhibit a woven-work textile piece incorporating her perching chair, a mobility aid she utilises day-to-day. However, when the time came to arrange delivery of the final work to the exhibition, it became clear that she would be unable

to manage at home without the perching chair, nor be without it for a significant duration of time. Instead, Raisa chose to communicate what she wanted to say in prose, creating a written piece that was exhibited where her perching chair would have been. Not only did this final piece communicate her lived experiences in a rousing and impactful way, the absence of the chair also made a powerful statement about the sheer importance of such mobility aids in disabled people's lives.

Payment Before Output

We live in a society that makes judgments about disabled people's worth based on their output. Ableist attitudes and systems mean our success is often measured by how well we conform and contribute to this inaccessible world we live in, and how well we emulate the actions of the non-disabled people around us.

Such ableist systems include fairly linear working environments – again, designed with non-disabled people in mind. Disabled people who want to engage with work often must make themselves fit within systems that weren't designed for them, and even when reasonable adjustments are implemented, doing so can still take an immense toll on a person's wellbeing. Although remote and flexible working is becoming more mainstream as a result of the pandemic, many disabled workers, including creatives, regularly have to make physical, social and emotional sacrifices to reach an agreed set of outcomes and 'earn' their wage.

Arguably the most progressive element of Mob-Shop can be seen in how this norm was challenged. Rather than paying artists as a result of producing their work, based on a fixed outcome, the director and curator made the executive decision to pay all commissioned artists their fee at any stage of the process they desired. This included the option of the creatives being paid before any work was produced, and affirmed that they would be paid regardless of whether or not their final work matched the expectations made at the start of the project. In line with the flexible outcome measures described above, it was also made categorically clear that artists would be paid their agreed commission even if they did not produce any work at all for Mob-Shop.

One such example of this can be seen with artist Mary Slattery. Her original commission was to produce a pamphlet-style publication about the experience of being in mobility shops and using mobility aids, but it quickly became clear that the magnitude of this could be an entire project in and of itself. As the artist was unable to carry out that commission, the original publication evolved into a much more straightforward medium of two artworks... and Mary's new level of involvement added an interesting new dynamic to the project. Her existing research work based on lived experiences of disability became a residency within the program, and her particularly creative approach to this research (a collectivist approach of connecting with others on a human level and information sharing through that process) has allowed Mob-Shop to evolve into a much broader exploration of the practices that disabled people use everyday to support themselves, and the ways in which these

ideas can be most-effectively communicated. The artist was paid their full fee even though the output did not match their original intentions, and seeing this as an investment in their wider work as a disabled activist and creative, their input enhanced the project in an unexpected but no-doubt beneficial way.

Rather than payment being seen as a capitalist transaction, made in exchange for a product or service, this approach challenged the rigid and ableist ways we generally think of as traditional working systems. Rather than the fee being used to pay creatives for their output, payments became seen as investments in the artist – grants that could help facilitate future projects or sustain their creative practice. Ultimately, the commissioned artists knew that they would be paid for their involvement, and that this pay would not be conditional based on their output.

Choosing to move forward in this way made a powerful statement about the perceived value of disabled creatives. Their physical output during this process became detached from their inherent worth as artists; with both this unique project and as individuals working in creative industries. The fact that this concept (pay before output, output detached from worth) seems so radical speaks volumes about the working climate many disabled people are contending with in today's society. There is much here that could be learned by other industries employing disabled people, including those outside of the creative space.

The Outcome

These working practices led to a unique selection of creative pieces, spanning a diverse range of formats. Physical works from three different artists were exhibited in three different libraries in the Derbyshire area – Aminder Virdee, Laura Daisy Cowley, and Raisa Kabir. In line with inclusion being at the heart of the project, it was essential that viewing these pieces was as accessible as possible for as many people as possible. Exhibiting in libraries lent itself well to this approach: public libraries follow county council code for accessibility measures, meaning the spaces already featured adjustments that made them more inclusive – including level access. The director took this one step further by also considering the needs of people with mobility issues who may not use mobility aids (either at all or during their visit) by requesting that high-backed seating is always made available in the vicinity of the exhibitions. As this seating was sometimes moved or removed by cleaners working in the space, library staff in each venue were made aware of its importance so they could monitor this themselves and ensure the seating options remained.

At these exhibitions, visitors could also pick up Mob-Shop's publication, a visually stunning physical poster showcasing work from Abi Palmer on one side and Kiara Mohamed & Dahab Abdullahi on the other. Having a piece to take home with them may enable some visitors to better pace themselves and fully appreciate the work in a more sustainable way, as well as use it as a resource to inform and educate other people about the topics central to this project, and indeed to disabled people's

lives. Additionally, this publication is available as a downloadable PDF in libraries across England, further increasing access to those who wish to engage with the work but may not be able to do so in person.

Also central to Mob-Shop is the podcast series, with episodes showcasing conversations with a diverse range of disabled contributors. At the time of writing the first episode has gone live, and beautifully sets the tone for what is to come – a thought-provoking series of ideas presented in an entertaining and easily comprehensible way. Each episode will be transcribed, and links provided to resources where keen listeners can find out more about the disability-related concepts described. Creating a podcast series alongside the physical exhibitions makes yet another powerful statement about inclusion: it's one of several ways that people who are housebound, or who struggle to routinely leave the house, can experience the project remotely in a way that's better suited for their needs.

Most notably, in relation to the output, is the director's perceptiveness to feedback from audiences. Communication was not only encouraged between the organisers and commissioned artists, but also between the director and the audience. One example of this can be seen on Mob-Shop's website, where there is a whole page dedicated to access and detailing the adjustments made. This includes a clear point of contact for people to reach out to if they feel something could be made more accessible for their needs, or if they would like further information or resources. Again, this commitment to inclusion is by no means performative or simply a

box-ticking exercise – it sets the precedent for genuinely open communication and continued development, and will no doubt offer valuable insight as the project continues to evolve.

Critique

Being such a transformative way of working, it becomes difficult to identify areas for improvement. Such proactive measures to consider the needs of artists and audiences means that Mob-Shop neatly side-steps many of the areas where other creative projects fall short... but it may be that the high standards of their real and genuine commitment to inclusion is the very thing that presents one identifiable weakness.

As well as ensuring physical exhibitions were as accessible as possible, the project directors were proactive in finding ways that people who could not experience them in person still had ways to engage with the project. This had already been achieved in the form of the website, publication and podcast, and plans were also made to offer a virtual walk-through of all exhibitions in public spaces. One critique that could be made here is that these virtual walk-throughs were not produced within the same timeframe as the launch of the physical exhibitions, meaning that people primarily based at home faced a significant time delay in experiencing the works and were therefore put at a disadvantage compared to those who were able to leave the house.

Having the desired online resources available in the same time scale as the exhibition would have ensured there was less discrepancy in audience's experiences of Mob-Shop based on whether or not they could leave the house. However, this poses the question of how we negotiate that, without compromising on the rest of the game-changing principles of the project. The delay in the production of these resources was due to the director and production's own capacity as disabled creatives, and the adjustments and expectations outlined for the commissioned artists involved in this project should of course apply to those in leadership roles too.

As such, there may not necessarily be a solution here... rather, yet another intriguing area for further exploration. How do we negotiate the additional (but essential) work that comes with providing inclusion for the diverse range of people even within the spectrum of disability, while ensuring the working practices remain accessible and feasible for all involved?

Conclusion

Mob-Shop set out to explore the ways mobility aids are perceived, and through the project so far, has helped portray invaluable insight from the people who know this experience most intimately. The creative output has had the power to elicit conversations both within and beyond the disability community, arguably at a time when such mutual understanding is more crucial than ever before.

As a continuing project committed to access at all stages of the endeavour, new elements will continue to emerge over the coming year – as will additional accessibility features. In both respects, it's safe to say that the project has virtually limitless potential: Mob-Shop will continue to embrace the unique lives of disabled people, and rally for this same principle to carry forward to the aids and equipment that enable them to thrive.