



Deaf Artists Build Their Toolkit during Childhood

Anne Sjöroos

Accessibility means that everyone has an equal chance at working within the field of culture. How does being deaf then affect participating in culture and the arts? Is it a deficiency and an obstacle to fully participating? Or is it a positive attribute that requires support in the form of activities in the person's native language?

I graduated with a degree in Cultural Management from Metropolia University of Applied Sciences in 2012 with high hopes. I was the only deaf sign language user in my class, and I studied for five years with the help of a sign language interpreter, but on the terms of the hearing. Perhaps that was the reason I wrote my thesis on how a theatre experience could be accessible and equal to all – despite not everyone having the same senses or using the same language. After all, during my studies, I had seen numerous theatre productions which I could not appreciate as much as my hearing student friends could. In all honesty, I could not come up with a single solution to this accessibility issue.

Perhaps because there is no single solution. Inclusion is a wonderful thing as far as accessibility is concerned, but it does not offer a solution for everyone. We are all individuals with unique needs, demands, and prerequisites for experiencing culture. Even if a hundred people watch the same theatre production, each person interprets it in their own way. We can only try to aim as close as possible, but the rest is up to the audience.

After graduating I worked for some well-established organisations. Working for them, I did not feel I could improve their cultural accessibility or inclusion, nor create something new, or experiment practically on how inclusion could be best achieved.

Therefore, I dreamed of starting my own company: a large sign language cultural facility to which all deaf artists of the world could come and feel at home there. They could work on their own terms, with their own identity, and in their own native language. They could get the support

of the community for carving their own path as an artist. They could make the Finnish field of culture equal through their own example.

Carving the Path of the Artist Begins during Childhood

In 2015, I had received enough encouragement and faith from my future colleagues Noora Karjalainen and Helena Torboli to establish the cooperative society Ursa Minor. Right from the start, the founding principle of Ursa Minor has been that the future will be inclusive. Sign languages are seen as no different from other languages, and sign language art is appreciated.

Sign language artists can carve a strong and coherent path all the way from early childhood on to being a professional artist, they can work and develop their artistry, and they are seen as an important part of the ecosystem of Finnish art. As a result of art and culture in our own language, we become equal.

Since inclusion belongs to everyone, and we come in many shapes and sizes, we can only speak from our own experience. At Ursa Minor, we are sign language users, so we can describe the experience of inclusion particularly from the perspective of a sign language user.

At first, we focused on adult artists and how to employ them and offer collaborative projects, but at some point, we realised that deaf people and children who use sign language had no artistic or cultural activities in their own language. When we organised single-day workshops or theatre events for children, the feedback was clear: people wanted more such activities on a regular basis. No one offered anything similar.

This was the beginning of one of the cornerstones of Ursa Minor: Laku.

Establishing Laku

Laku, in Finnish, is an abbreviation of 'children's cultural activities in sign language'. At first, we organised Laku workshops where children got a taste of different artistic and cultural activities, such as visual arts, theatre, film, and photography.

Gradually Laku was so established that the term ‘workshop’ could no longer apply. We began collaborating with Pitäjämäki primary school, the students of which include those who use sign language. In the spring and autumn terms we organised two activities each where the children had the chance to try a new cultural activity and get guidance in their own language. At first there were a couple of meetings, then six, and eventually the activities took all autumn or spring. Now there are activities every autumn/spring with 15 meetings per activity.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Laku went online, where it suddenly became nation-wide, as children regardless of where they lived or went to school could access Laku activities online.

Now, Laku is a part of the Finnish model for leisure activities project started by the city of Helsinki. Theatre has become an all-but established part of Laku activities, as it is by far the most popular cultural activity among children who use sign language. And no wonder: it enables one to express themselves fully in their own language.

Rich Sign Language Identity

The more established Laku became, the greater its significance grew. We found a way to offer a valuable arts and culture activity to deaf people and children who use sign language, in their own language. This enables people to carve their own artistic path from the start, while having their linguistic identity at the forefront. This is

not accomplished on the terms of the majority, the hearing, as these terms do not often fit well with a sign language identity.

When a deaf child is placed in the same group with hearing children for a creative activity, often with the help of a sign language interpreter, they do not get the building blocks with which to construct their own artistic identity in sign language. They do not know how to realise or grow this identity as they cannot get the right tools for it from instructors who can hear. I argue that in this case, the child will most likely at some point experience deafness as an obstacle and a deficiency that hinders their activity. This may lead to ending an otherwise stimulating hobby. The inner artist of the child never gets to flourish.

This is not the case when the instructors themselves are artists whose native language is sign language, as they are at Laku. Here the instructor is not only a model for language identity, but also a model for how to carve the path of an artist. The goal of Laku is to cement a strong foundation for a path that carries them through life. This is how these children will become artists who leave their mark on the Finnish cultural landscape, making it an equal space for everyone, and demonstrating that there is no one right way of being an artist, but instead it belongs to all. Deafness becomes something to be treasured. It becomes a positive attribute that requires an environment that supports activities in a native language. ●

Exercises

Exercise 1

Think about the sense of hearing. In your group or activity, what things are dependent on hearing?

Exercise 2

Have you or anyone you know heard from someone that their physical attributes are a limitation or that they prevent an activity? Reflect on the impact and consequences of such a message.

Exercise 3

‘In inclusive thinking, we focus primarily on abilities and resources, and any differences or deviation in abilities are seen as features, not as weaknesses or reasons for ostracising. The opposite of inclusion is segregation, where special groups receive separate services based on their differences and challenges’. Discuss in which cases segregation is called for, or where it could be a better option than inclusion. Share your thoughts with the group.