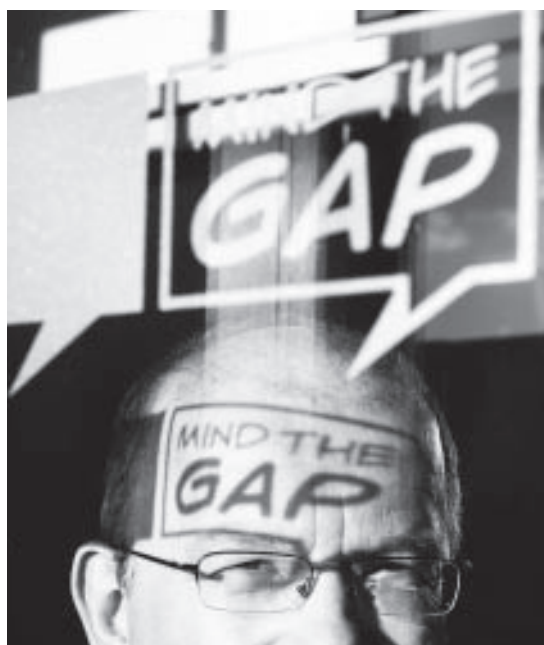


Thought turned to action

Tim Wheeler reflects on the everyday practice of leadership

Revolution, said the nineteenth-century anarchist, writer and activist Emma Goldman, is simply ‘thought turned to action’.



Mind the Gap is a theatre company based in Bradford, West Yorkshire. Our aim is to make it possible for learning-disabled and non-disabled artists to work together as equals – not as therapist and client or facilitator and participant, but as artists working together.

So, for the past 21 years Mind the Gap has been exploring that simple idea. What if people with learning disabilities were included in theatre making, not as passive recipients but as active participants, actors, even leaders? What kind of theatre would be created? What if ... things were different?

In 2008 we moved into our new home in an old silk mill in Bradford. It took eight years, £2.1m of arts, Lottery and European money, and the combined thought, passion

and sheer hard graft of nearly 200 people, disabled and non-disabled professionals and enthusiasts. As Artistic Director it was my role to lead – though for much of that time I followed. I followed the ideas of people who were far more experienced than me; people who knew how to make workspaces both accessible and beautiful. I followed learning-disabled colleagues who showed how unnecessarily complicated the places we work in can be, and how access is more than just ramps and lifts. I followed Julia Skelton, Mind the Gap’s Administrative Director who knew how to raise funds, draw up budgets and work patiently with architects, solicitors, builders, local authority and Arts Council officers to make things happen. Along the way, I asked a simple question: how can this space be different?

I have been blown away by how people rose to the challenge. Now we work in one of the most beautiful, fit-for-purpose spaces in the UK. Don’t take my word for it – come and see for yourself.

So what have I learnt about leadership?

I’ve always had a problem connecting theory and practice (in minding the gap!). Nobody taught me how to lead. Working with Mark Wright of People Create Limited over the past few years, I took part in the Cultural Leadership Programme’s Leadership Development Days and Leadership Unleashed. That helped me to give names to processes and approaches that I had bumped into or half-discovered along the way.

Mind the Gap’s approach to thinking about what works is both mindful and pragmatic. My role has shifted over



time, and shifts daily responding to different circumstances. I think I have what Mark describes as a situational style: I act differently in a rehearsal room (mostly collaborative), when speaking at a conference (hopefully charismatic), or in a staff meeting (sometimes quiet, at other times transformational). The difficulty for me is to remember to change my role as I move from situation to situation.

It's a popular myth that artistic directors are power-obsessed tyrants. Of course, sometimes we can see this kind of behaviour in others and, if honest, in our own actions. Try being a power-obsessed tyrant full-time ... it's very tiring! Better to be collaborative and cooperative, sharing power with others, and being clear about what's negotiable and what's not.

In 2006 Mind the Gap ran a year-long leadership-training programme

for Cultural Leadership Programme that helped develop the leadership skills of learning-disabled people. From that experience sprang Sync (www.syncleadership.co.uk), which focuses on the interplay between disability and leadership, and which aims to provide information and opportunities for leadership development in ways that are accessible, relevant and considerate of the unique perspective of disabled people.

Now at Mind the Gap we have a group of young people with a learning disability who meet regularly to generate ideas and new things they would like to do. They call themselves the Ideas Forum or IF. And they ask a very simple question: what IF ... things were different? They are a great source of energy and passion that helps to shape our future direction.

I think that as creative practitioners we need to ensure that creativity is at the core of what we do and how we lead. It's why we do it that matters. Goldman put it succinctly: 'If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution.' ●



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