

INTRODUCTION

I'll begin with a short anecdote:

[W]hen I was touring with Zippo's Circus in the early 1990s, [...] I recall [a workshop participant] questioning whether she would be able to do the trapeze whilst not disclosing her reasons and in my cavalier manner I told her of course she would be able to do it, with my help. [...] It was only when she put out both hands to take hold of the low trapeze bar that I noticed one hand didn't move. Until that moment it had been so well disguised by her clothing and of course I hadn't been looking for it. She managed to sit on the trapeze and demonstrate a few simple postures that minimised the use of both arms, just as her [fellow participants] had done and was thrilled with her success. No mention of her arm was made before, during or afterwards. (Carter, K. 20)ⁱ

Even 23 years on I still remember that day as being extraordinary, wondrous and mind-boggling. I had seldom met people with prostheses and certainly never a trapezist using one. That encounter however, planted the seed that has grown into an obsession to know what is possible. It also reminds me that knowledge and experience in different blends can be very useful. If I had known of her impairment, would I have doubted her or my abilities to ensure her full inclusion? Or would we have continued as we did? Having only noticed her unmoving hand when she took hold of the bar, I felt I was already committed and so was she.

It's an exciting opportunity for me to talk to you today, many of whom I know from different aerial and circus adventures. What I share will undoubtedly be commonplace for some of you but regardless of your experience I hope there is something that makes you think, question or even congratulate yourselves on the accessible nature of your work in circus.

Today I will be offering a brief overview on teaching accessible aerial from philosophical and practical perspectives. The topic is much bigger than I can cover in twenty minutes, so if anyone has questions then I will try to answer them afterwards or you can always contact me at another time for a longer conversation.

Before I venture into how you might develop the accessibility of your aerial practice, I wanted to whet your appetites with a few historical notes that you may not be aware of. Disabled aerialists are not new to the twenty-first century; however, they do appear to have been forgotten in our histories. Through my PhD research and then again in my UNfrIQUE project (hence the T-shirt) (that involved the lovely Milton Lopes, Steven Bunce and Tiiu Mortley with guidance from Jenny Sealey) I came across one-legged acrobats, tumblers, leapers, cyclists and

trapeze artists; I learned of paraplegic acrobats who became world leaders in hand-balancing and small-statured artists who performed as clowns but who also developed techniques of walking upside down across theatres by their feet. Whilst circus and disability stories tended historically to perpetuate a freak-show narrative, this was later turned into one of therapy or social participation (which is still prominent and of interest and importance) but there are other accounts of professionalism and artistry that are now returning, not least through the Paralympic Opening Ceremony in London 2012 and with the baton now being firmly carried forward by yourselves and Extraordinary Bodies. One of my ambitions is to bring some of those old historical stories back to life in conjunction with contemporary artists. Being here with you is an exciting opportunity to contribute to the future of the circus arts being more diverse, inclusive and creative. Thank you for the opportunity.

Moving onto Accessible Aerial. What is it? Who can do it? And how can we make it happen?

ACCESSIBLE AERIAL

To begin, I believe it is useful to understand what we mean by disability and impairment if trying to make our disciplines more widely accessible.

Firstly, there is the Medical Model of Disability, which according to the Equality Act of 2010 defines a disabled person as having ‘a physical or mental impairment’ and ‘the impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on [their] ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities’ (Legislation.gov.uk 4-5)ⁱⁱ. The disability, in this definition, is intertwined with the impairment, and certainly in everyday vernacular, they are often used interchangeably. The second definition, however, is known as the Social Model of Disability which defines disability as:

[T]he disadvantage or restriction of activity caused by a contemporary social organisation which takes no or little account of people who have [...] impairments and thus excludes them from participation in ... mainstream social activities. (UPIAS qtd. in Oliver & Barnes 21 my emphasis)ⁱⁱⁱ

The medical model therefore defines the disability as coming from the person with the impairments and the social model defines disability as the disadvantages arising by society not taking people with impairments into consideration. Rather than being a matter of semantics, the difference between the two is philosophical, political and social and ultimately can have significantly diverse practical implications. Focusing on a person's pathology can result in the

search for a cure, but for many a cure is never going to be available, and nor is it necessarily desired. Focusing on the social barriers that prevent people with impairments from participating in activities can mean the start of a journey towards access. To make this a bit clearer, it is unlikely that dwarfism will be 'cured' and for many it is not an impairment in and of itself, though additional medical conditions might also be presented. Having small and low trapezes in a venue will offer an opportunity that having large and high bars removes, thus automatically reducing some socially disabling factors for small-statured people to engage in the aerial arts. As aerial trainers, we are not seeking to cure people's impairments, so it is the social disabling barriers to which we need to pay attention.

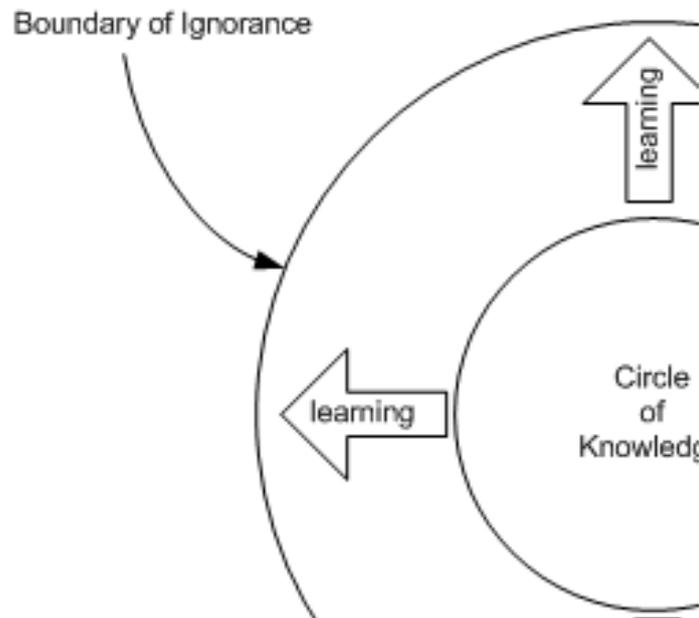
I wonder if you might for a moment just think about your own teaching experiences. How have you set up your teaching environment? How do you communicate with your diverse student populations? Do you offer the same types of classes to everyone? Do you find yourself adjusting your space, equipment or style for beginners, intermediates and professionals? Or for those doing a degree programme compared to those participating in a one-off hen-party weekend? What small (or big) adjustments for students do you make who are shy, nervous, have a chronic fear of heights, are overweight, have limited upper body strength or who struggle to remember things? At what point in time are these adjustments made? During the class, or in the planning process? If we look at our teaching practices and our participating groups and analyse what we do and why, we are probably making minor and major adjustments as a matter of course. How then might we make similar adjustments for people who have more classically recognisable sensory, cognitive or physical impairments?

Later, I will look at specifics of the teaching environment and practice but I want to next address our roles as teachers, guides and facilitators focusing specifically on accepting our own limitations in knowledge, skills and practical applications.

ACCEPTING LIMITATIONS: KNOW WHAT YOU KNOW...

How many of you here are involved in teaching? Have you ever considered yourself an imposter, that you don't know enough? Have you sensed the more you know, the more you know *you don't know*? Just me? American academic and blogger Jim McGee explains that 'expanding [one's] circle of knowledge ... simultaneously expand[s] [one's] boundaries of ignorance'^{iv} and he offers this simple but effective diagram. As you increase your Circle of Knowledge (the inside circle on the diagram) you automatically increase the external

Boundary of Ignorance; that is, the more you know, the more you learn there is yet to know.



Suffice it to say here, that self-critique, awareness and even occasionally self-doubt are useful tools, especially when you are potentially putting other people's lives at risk. Combining a strong sense of self as a teacher with a humility to appreciate none of us will ever know everything, opens the opportunity for exploration, experimentation and mutual support and learning. I am not saying we stop teaching, but we do perhaps stop implying that we have all the answers. In addition to understanding yourself as a teacher, it is also vital to understand why your students are there to learn; are they obliged to be there as part of a course or training programme and if so what are the learning objectives? Are they recreational learners wishing to try something new, or to get fit? Are you offering creative programmes or running set choreographic routines as for example I do in aerial yoga? Armed with your knowledge of aerial, your teaching ability and the knowledge of your students you should be able to develop a strong, ethical and workable accessible pedagogical philosophy.

Accessible Aerial is like a combination of a diligent novice teacher passing on her skills to absolute beginners who have a limited idea of what aerial entails and possibly an unclear notion of how their bodies will function in conjunction with it. Most crucial to remember, is that beginners often behave unpredictably. It is a union between knowing what you know (the aerial) and accepting there may well be plenty that you don't know (how different bodies relate to those actions) and finding the most suitable language and transfer means possible whilst trying to anticipate the unexpected. A significant difference between working with non-

disabled new aerialists and disabled newcomers is that many disabled people have a deep knowledge of their own bodies and how they function (or don't) and will therefore often be your best guides in guiding them and their aerial learning. A caveat to this however, is that different cultures may well be very different.

A good friend told me that she 'trust[s] a teacher if they take the time for [her] to tell them about [her] disability and how fragile [she] can be without them being put off by this'. Another said she would get frustrated that teachers were 'scared to ask what you can do, or suggest things for fear of insulting you' which led to them not being 'pushed enough' in classes. Others told me that in their experience teachers had been unable to 'advise on adaptations' or 'rarely have the time in groups to give you the support required'. Please bear these things in mind when we look at an accessible environment and pedagogy.

CREATING AN ACCESSIBLE ENVIRONMENT

I appreciate that what you feel **comfortable** doing and what you **can** do will depend on your own circumstances. If you are a one-woman-band like me most of the time, there are significant financial, time and practical limitations that can significantly impact on just how accessible your work might become, which larger organisations should be able to do more readily. If you hire a venue rather than run your own space, some of these will also vary. In a nutshell, here are my five key suggestions on how to begin making your environment accessible, but apologies they have been kept very brief due to time:

1. **Pre-class Information:** focus on clarity, necessary detail and ideally offer it in different formats which could simply be offering to have a conversation rather than requiring everyone to read the information.
2. **The Venue:** consider access in terms of parking, toilets, a welcoming manner, lifts to the training space, whether wheelchairs are allowed on the floor if working on a specialist surface etc.
3. **Language & Communication:** if like me you aren't proficient in BSL but are happy to work alongside interpreters let this be known; speak to the participant and not the support workers where possible and be clear about use of touch in spotting especially for Deaf people. Ensure you have protocols in place when people are working at height e.g. how will you communicate with Deaf aerialists who are out of your reach? Be direct and clear about your experience and understanding; try not to make grand assumptions about someone's ability without first speaking with them. Ask what you **need** to know, not just

what you are curious about. Disabled people do not need your pity but they may need your help; if you don't know how you can assist, just ask.

4. **Equipment:** ideally have access to different types, heights and sizes of equipment e.g. wide, narrow, low and high bars if possible; have a pulley system that can easily and ideally immediately adjust height; have a mix of supportive equipment such as mats of different types to raise the floor level or chairs that can be used to climb onto or off.
5. **Attitude:** Most importantly, ensure that you, your staff and other participants are open to difference, to challenges and to 'not knowing the answers' but are willing to learn.

ACCESSIBLE PEDAGOGY: SUSPENDING THE RULES

As you've all been so patient listening to me up till now, I think it is about time we did a little audience participation. Don't worry, it will be relatively harmless! Let's set the scene. We are all gathered together to do an aerial workshop; you're new to it and we don't know one another but I want to lead us in a preparatory warm-up. Before we begin however, if it is unwise for you to raise your heart-rate at this moment, then please enjoy watching and encourage others to do it instead.

- Please find a space where you can move freely.
- You can sit or stand. You can move in any way you like. Work alone or join in with someone else, whatever you fancy.
- Our aim is to raise the heart rate and we're going to do this for about 30 seconds.
- Any questions? Are we ready? Go!!!
- You can pummel your arms, you can jog on the spot, you can run around the room...
- Can you feel the heat rising? Go on work a bit harder!
- AND STOP!!

All okay? Great. Hopefully you have the oxygen coursing through your veins now so you can listen attentively for another few minutes!

Encouraging participants to find their own ways of meeting the point of an exercise can provide you with useful information and offer participants a safe place from which to begin. Here I asked you to raise your heart rates rather than command we all run on the spot. You can assess who understands how to raise their heart-rate; you might witness differences in confidence – who is jumping straight into action, and who is remaining quite inactive? You can take time to work around the room to feedback to everyone, congratulating or goading them as required as you are not having to lead from the front. You might notice stiffness in some people or hypermobility in others. You may notice who is concentrating and who is struggling

to remember what they are supposed to be doing. Most importantly however, is that the students have not been excluded by the very first thing you ask them to do – some may not be able to stand, let alone run – but nor have you singled them out to do something different to everyone else.

Taking the nature of this exercise into the air, I often begin an adult class with tasks such as: 'find ways on and off the trapeze'. There are obviously a few caveats to this exercise. I ensure the equipment I offer them is at a mix of heights and that safety equipment is in place; I also state that the actions should be safely undertaken and that no 'jumping off' is allowed – at least to begin with! Students clamber up and over, around and through, discovering and rediscovering things that other trained aerialists do on a regular basis as well as finding other innovative ways. Of course, you might have some who have learned trapeze previously, and they often feel there is a 'right' way of doing things, and whilst certainly not 'wrong' I encourage them to think outside what they already know, to free their minds and bodies into what else might be possible.

This enables me to see their strengths and possible weaknesses as the warming-up exercise did, but in a specifically aerial way. I also witness creativity, self-consciousness, trepidation and the gung-ho. Importantly for the students, this can give them an immediate sense of ownership over their learning and their active participation. It provokes them into active thinking, exploration and analysis; it is often fun and rewarding; it engenders an environment of sharing as one sees another and tries their actions and vice versa.

There are also challenges as some people would much rather be led than discover for themselves. If they are struggling, you can suggest they watch others, or give them some clues to easy and attainable actions to build their confidence but depending on the reasons for inaction, you might after much cajoling also find that showing and copying works best for them in the first instance. Whilst I devised these exercises initially to stimulate a sense of playfulness and exploration of aerial spaces for physical theatre students studying circus, I discovered that they offered a much more accessible approach to disabled participants. Not only are you offering students opportunities to explore a new partnership between the equipment and their bodies, but you are also facilitating a creative methodological approach where there are multiple ways of achieving the same thing.

You can then add to this exercise as you see fit, perhaps suggesting that they enter the trapeze from behind, the front, the side, from above, or below. You could suggest they use different body parts to challenge or make it easier; how about taking weight or finding balance on different body parts and on different parts of the equipment. Once more familiar with different equipment I often have them explore more prosaic actions in the air such as 'standing, sitting, lying, crouching'; the individuals may not be able to 'stand' but they can take the idea of standing and replicate that by supporting themselves in different ways on the equipment; taking their weight in their hands or arms and allowing the body to hang below in say a crucifix on the bar etc. could be an interpretation of standing.

Using task-based teaching approaches offers you and your students an opportunity to explore what is currently possible; by taking time to then analyse what enabled those actions to occur can aid in the development of more complex actions. How did a one-armed participant manage to stand on the bar? What enabled a small-statured person to hold a front-balance position? What was the favoured equipment for a person with jerking actions from perhaps cerebral palsy? Where did the Deaf man need you to be, to continue a conversation whilst in the air?

You will naturally come to a time when you want to teach specific aerial manoeuvres, poses, tricks, transitions, wraps and drops. It will always be the case, whether working with predominantly disabled or non-disabled participants, that not all things will be possible to all people at the same time – nor indeed ever. To proceed beyond the first session and combining task-based with prescriptive systems needs a form of translation. We might want to share the mermaid/merman position that is classically a one-armed sideways hold with the body arching into a backwards banana shape. It appears on all sorts of aerial equipment but can be quite strenuous on that one arm if the student is not used to it. I often demonstrate the position first, have the students try it on the ground (or on chairs) and then translate it into the air, possibly in stages. It might be useful to think beforehand what options are readily available to undertake this or something like it. For example, they can hold with one arm or both; they can wrap the arm for additional support; they can hold with an elbow or possibly a strong wrist; they can lean straight backwards and cut out the rotation altogether. Having a hand-loop available can be handy, to secure the hand and wrist in place if grip is significantly challenged. The mermaid/merman is the template, it is an idea that we then interpret or translate onto our own bodies; mine is not "the" mermaid, but "a" mermaid.

Throughout my teaching, I try to include combinations of task-based and prescriptive learning, particularly if I have an ongoing relationship with the students. If students only ever learn from watching and copying, how will they be able to develop their own aerial identities? Are we not just making clones of ourselves or those we view on YouTube? More importantly, if you do not share the same physiological makeup as your students how can they copy your actions and why would they want to? When working with people who have diverse physicalities, then, as you will get with a beginner class, your role is about ensuring all are included and that you have as many alternatives as possible up your sleeve. If someone presents something particularly unique, then take time to have a conversation in the first place to see what you can strive to achieve together; it can be challenging but hugely creative, exploratory and fun.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, to offer accessible aerial requires some forethought and light analysis of your current working practices. The following questions might be a useful starting point:

Understand yourself as teacher

- What is it you do? What do you offer and what are you happy to develop?
- Are you a beginner or experienced aerialist? If you are just starting out on your own aerial journey, then how capable are you at unpicking the actions you have recently learned?
- Are you teaching set choreographies in a limited time-frame or offering bespoke workshops to individuals and groups?
- Why do you want to teach?
- Do you envisage aerial as being open to all or do you believe it should just be for the select few?
- Are you a stickler for the rules? Who made these rules and for whose benefit are they? Why point your toes if flexing is just as useful? What is aesthetic and what is functional?

Assess the environment

- Are you a lone tutor struggling to make ends meet or do you run a thriving studio with a mix of tutors and support staff?
- How many adjustments can you realistically make to your current working environment and practices?
- Is there wheelchair access to the venue, to toilet facilities?
- Do you have access to a mix of equipment and adjustable apparatus at any given time?

Understand your students

- Who are you teaching? Why are they coming and how much support do they need in relation to what you can offer?

And finally, are you willing and able to adjust your teaching plan to those you have present in the space? If so, then I think you are on your way.

ⁱ Carter, K. (2014) *Suspending Conventions: How 'disabled aerialists' are challenging aesthetic and methodological practices in 21st Century aerial(ism)* available at: https://pure.royalholloway.ac.uk/portal/files/24090228/2015_Carter_K_M_PhD.pdf

ⁱⁱ Legislation.gov.uk *Equality Act 2010: Disability* Available at: <http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2010/15/section/6>

ⁱⁱⁱ Oliver, M. & C. Barnes. (2012) *The New Politics of Disablement*. Palgrave Macmillan. Available at: <http://disability-studies.leeds.ac.uk/files/library/Barnes-implementing-the-social-model-chapter-7.pdf>

^{iv} McGee, J. (2006) *Circles of knowledge and boundaries of ignorance* available at: <http://mcgeemusings.net/2006/08/29/circles-of-knowledge-and-boundaries-of-ignorance/> [Accessed 28th May 2017]