

Step Change Studios Transcript

Hello, my name is Rashmi Becker and I am the founder of Step Change Studios.

We provide opportunities for disabled people to be active through dance and today I'll talk about how covid has impacted our work and give you an example of a fun project or activity that we have recently taken part in.

So, I established Step Change Studios to address the lack of opportunities for disabled people and people with long term health conditions to be active through dance.

Dance is a really fantastic way for people to be active and is particularly great for people with communication difficulties because it transcends language barriers and it also brings people together in a way that doesn't feel like more formal sport that can sometimes intimidate people in terms of the kit and the rules and having to follow particular ways of doing things.

Dance is very much about self-expression and creativity but also being active.

People that have taken part in dance with us tell us of a really wide range of benefits from improved communication, concentration, tackling social isolation and feeling a greater sense of belonging, boosting peoples independence as well as the physical benefits such as coordination and mobility.

There are 12 million people in the UK who are aged 65 and over and one in five people in the UK has a disability. What we found is that both older people and disabled people want to be active. They want opportunities to be able to be more included and participating in society. We also know that covid has disproportionately affected those people so people that are older with long term health conditions but also disabled people.

When covid hit and we had the lockdown, the people we support to dance were particularly impacted. They were afraid and a lot of them were facing particularly high levels of exclusion and isolation.

They were very nervous about going out and it was actually one of our blind dance students that reached out to us before we even had a chance to think about how we were going to respond and asked if we were going to be delivering any online sessions.

This is interesting for us because working with people with sensory impairments, a lot of our work relies on physical contact and being able to physically show people helps people learn how to move.

But what we found was by working with our participants and trying to understand how best to engage them we were able to create a personal opportunity that brought people together.

We had to learn how to develop our language and make it much more visual where we were working at a distance. The most important lesson we learned was that during these times what people really wanted and valued was an opportunity to come together and to be part of the community. The person that had reached out to me, she was having to shield and had no support and she became a grandmother during lockdown.

While she hadn't been able to see her grandson, we were able to announce that she had become a grandmother during one of our online sessions and we were able to have a lovely online celebration and make her feel special. She could share her good news with all the group rather than being on her own at home.

One of the other challenges we found during covid is interpreting the government guidance for people with different sensory mental and physical impairments. For example, if you have sight loss it can be very difficult to understand and recognise how to keep your social distance. One of the things we had to think about was more tactile forms of communication. If we were in a space with smaller groups, we had to think about whether there are more physical ways that we can support people to understand how to keep their space. For example, can we provide seated dance, or can people sit on exercise balls and dance in a different way where they are able to contain themselves within a certain space while being with others.

That's also true for people with learning disabilities and autism for example who may not understand how to keep their distance. The other important thing I realised is that while venues we work in may have excellent risk assessments it's important for us to go in and re-assess those spaces as being suitable in meeting guidance for people with disabilities and additional needs.

If you're a wheelchair user one of the spaces, we use has excellent provision of sanitizer for example and signage, but the sanitizer was placed at a level that was not within reach for the wheelchair user. Thinking about things like that and access to and cleanliness of disabled loos, thinking about touch points when it comes to lifts and ramps and handrails etc. One of the other things I would recommend that we developed and have worked with others to develop is more accessible material and guidance and teaching materials. We have produced a lot of video material with captioning and we have produced easy read version. Also, thinking about audio, how you can share things in advance before class to manage people's expectations of what they're going to experience so they're not going to be anxious whether it's coming back to a physical space or understanding how something will translate into an online space.

The other thing of course has been around technology and that's both the access to technology because a lot of people we work with either don't know how to use certain technologies such as zoom (which I think a lot of us didn't know about before covid!) but also the accessibility of technology. Even when providers say they are accessible, or they conform to accessibility guidelines we were finding that screen readers for people with sight loss were not always accessible in all parts of the applications. We have been liaising with certain providers to make them aware and to encourage greater user testing.

I'd like to finish by telling you about an activity we've recently been involved in which is [Silver Sunday](#), a national celebration of older people. Normally every year we and the wider UK are encouraged to hold activities that celebrate older people and we normally have a huge dance event where we take part in a fantastic tea dance. It's the highlight of the year! This year we decided to reach out to an older people's charity called [Open Age](#) and work with Silver Sunday to create an online dance challenge.

We created a dance routine, a seated dance routine to a song from the musical "Singing in the rain and we encouraged people over 50 to send in their video having a go at the routine. We also ran some sessions with open age to give people an opportunity to learn the dance routine together and then to send this recording. Even the founder of silver Sunday who is also a councillor for older people got involved.

When we had all the videos, we then created a montage which we shared on social media. One of the things we also had to think about of course was things like licencing and we were

really thrilled that Warner who owned the music rights were quick to respond and very supportive and loved what we were doing. They whitelisted us so that we wouldn't get blocked on social media and on YouTube when we published the video. Before I share the Silver Sunday montage which we called #SilverShowbiz I wanted to end with some reflections and these are both what we've learned during these challenging times but also encapsulate how we work and how we want to work moving forward. I'm calling these the five C's.

The first C is collaboration.

Don't try to do everything on your own.

Seek out like minded partners who share your values who can help you enrich your work and the impact of what you do.

The second C is communication.

So, this is about how you engage in making sure you're communicating in ways that are accessible and relevant to your participants and audiences.

The third C is about creativity.

We can often be very focused on outcomes, but I found that people learn and develop much more when they're having fun so think about how to make what you're doing even through these challenging times, fun and creative.

The fourth C is connectedness.

This is not just about access to and accessibility of technology it's also about connecting emotionally with people. This has been a particularly challenging time and remains so in terms of people's mental health and wellbeing so bringing people together as a community and helping people to connect with each other even virtually is critical.

Lastly celebration.

Bringing people together is also about celebrating each other's achievements, valuing every individual and making people feel that despite these difficult times they are part of something that can feel good and that can raise their sense of wellbeing.