

'Seeing In The Dark' 12th – 16th December 2003, Dhaka, Bangladesh

A 'Communicating for Advocacy' (CFA) project by Healthlink Worldwide (HLWW) in partnership with Social Assistance and Rehabilitation for the Physically Vulnerable (SARPV).

Introduction

'Seeing in the dark' was developed to respond to the challenge of finding new, innovative and appropriate advocacy tools for marginalised and vulnerable communities to strengthen their voice in their response to their own health and development needs. To explore the ways in which experiential understanding of disabilities can be developed, an approach that embraces working methods in both the arts and development was employed, resulting in the creation of an installation or interactive space.

Seeing in the Dark (SITD) was the title chosen by project participants for an installation that was built in the Dhruvad Gallery, Dhaka. The basic idea for the installation was to create blackout in the gallery in order to simulate total blindness for sighted visitors, who would have to deal with a series of everyday hazards recreated within this environment. The project community fully understood the dangers of suggesting that simulation can fully explain any kind of disability to the wider world – a risk they humorously referred to as 'Disney Disability' However, it is the very acknowledgement and celebration of the great differences between many kinds of disability that allowed the team, in the case of SITD to use a simulated environment. Sight is the only physical sense that can be blocked by non-invasive means, without physical intervention, simply by the removal of all light. True, you cannot simulate the emotional effects of any disability, however, for the period of time a visitor spends in the installation, they are actually experiencing the physical reality of being unable to see. This is without the benefit of an enhanced sense of hearing or the ability to read an audible map of your surroundings, as a visually impaired person would.

Process Overview

The basic idea of the project was developed with a group of about 25 blind and partially sighted people and a small self-help group of wheelchair users, who were to be the participants in the project. The group then set about collecting ideas for activities, hazards and sounds that they would like visitors to experience within the installation, as though they themselves were blind. These ideas ranged from parking a bus in the gallery, to the exercise of distinguishing between cheap and expensive daal. Some other items on the list included – a kitchen, open drains, a rickshaw, road dividers, slippery surfaces and a vast selection of items that are difficult to distinguish between such as different oils, vegetables, ropes, rice, lentils, sugar / salt, and clean / dirty items.

This meeting was carefully documented (another valued and promoted aspect of the project) both on paper and with audio recordings, giving rise to a list of popular ideas that needed to be realized. The main issues raised by this open sharing of life experiences, that practicalities of time and space allowed for inclusion in the installation, were –

- **Transport**
- **Road crossing**
- **Identification of goods in the market**
- **Distinguishing between different denominations of currency**
- **Vulnerability to abuse of women and girls with disabilities**

The plan of Dhruvad gallery was ideal to house the installation. It consists of 6 rooms arranged in satellite fashion around a central joining space, a reception room, entrance porch and garden. Each of the 6 internal rooms was used to deal with a different set of issues raised in the brainstorming session. At this point in the project it was necessary to split into groups and generate material to present to the public. At any one time during the next two days groups of between 2 and 10 participants would be involved in the following –

- **Sound recording** – as a part of this project SARPV have gained the facility of a portable Minidisk recorder, microphone and multitrack hard disk recorder. As a sound editing and CD production facility, this technology builds on the existing video

equipment used for reporting, archiving and documentation within SARPV. In this instance it was used by participants under the guidance of SARPV staff to make environmental recordings. These recordings were then edited into montages for playback specific to the contents of the gallery.

- **Photography** – SARPV staff trained in photography were able to facilitate visually impaired participants in taking photographs in response to their reading of other non-visual stimuli around them. During the project, extensive road works surrounding the gallery attracted the photographers' attention.
- **Lightproofing** – All windows and doors to the gallery had to be sealed with layers of brown paper, black paint and multiple layers of black curtain.
- **Procuring** – everything from materials and tools to furniture and all the necessary contents of the installation.
- **Building and assembly** – Installation contents had to be choreographed into position including the construction of a light trap built around the entrance. Wheelchair ramps also had to be built to allow maximum accessibility to the gallery.
- **Documentation and poster making** – Participants generated a collection of statements or slogans reflecting their wishes/hopes/frustrations, from which posters could be made for the reception area.
- **Propmaking** – Fake lottery tickets, currency etc

Installation described

On arrival at the gallery, a large bright *Seeing in the Dark* banner was hung in the trees above the entrance, through which 2 wheelchair ramps mounted the porch to a desk where a Braille machine and operator were on hand to print your name in Braille on your programme for a fee of 5 Taka. The walls were adorned with banners advocating social equality.

The reception room had more banners and posters of quotations from the participants. A large sheet of paper was there for visitors to write down their reactions to and feelings about the installation. One wall was lined with photographs including those taken by the participants. Visitors were given a white cane and introduced to a partially sighted guide who were on hand to lead them around the installation. The guide explained that the visitor can find their way by tapping their cane against a rope attached to the floor along the length of the path through the installation. They were then given 100 Tk (fake) to spend, and asked to memorise the name of a colour printed in Braille. The tour begun by passing through two double thickness black curtains at either end of a short dark corridor leading into –

Room 1 – The sound of rickshaw bells, traffic and shouting swells, there is a cycle rickshaw parked with a driver in the saddle plying for trade. Each visitor gets into the rickshaw and pays the driver (all Taka notes are identical irrespective of denomination). Dismounting the rickshaw we wait for the deafening noise of a train passing a level crossing before entering –

Room 2 – A cacophony of heavy traffic horns and shouting. The ground turns to dirt beneath our feet and we begin to cross a busy road. At the centre of the road there is a road divider of bricks to climb and cross over to reach the other side. Throughout, heavy lorry sounds pass right to left. The rope winds sharply leading into –

Room 3 – A sensory garden full of palms, with vegetation suspended from the ceiling. Other textures such as feather dusters protrude into the path which is littered with leaves crunching under foot. Birds are singing, and the guide invites us to find a seat in the park. Once all are seated, the birdsong is joined by a woman's voice recounting her story of being disabled, incestuously abused and how this has affected her. The call of a lottery ticket vendor bids us into the next room –

Room 4 – We buy lottery tickets, more money changes hands. The guide leads us to a wardrobe rail and we choose a shirt to wear. Everyone tries to choose a piece of braille that matches the one they memorised beforehand. Leading into -

Room 5 – A market stall is selling ropes, daal, 2 kinds of rice, salt, sugar, garlic and three kinds of onion. There is litter to trip over on the floor and a market trader to haggle with. It is

hard to differentiate between similar types of produce, once salt is in a bag it is easy to mistake it for the expensive sugar you paid for. Leaving the market through more curtains we arrive back in reception to readjust our eyes and discover that we have been cheated on every transaction, and the clean feeling shirt chosen from the wardrobe rail actually has an enormous curry stain all over it. Does the braille match?

Responsibilities of participants during opening hours

Running the installation employed 5-6 people within the blackout area, plus several others in the reception area. The workforce comprised a guide, rickshaw driver, lottery ticket seller and 1-2 market traders and a sound operator mixing the soundscapes and storytelling. Outside the simulated environment the entrance was carefully guarded to prevent strays entering unguided. There was a group of participants and SARPV staff on hand to brief visitors before entering and interview them after the experience. All of these roles were shared out to include a large number of the participants working in rotation. This was very necessary, since the various jobs of role-play and acting as a guide proved to be hard work. Over the course of the opening period of the installation participants perfected their acting skills. Two women particularly enjoyed taking the upper hand as market traders. Their haggling with visitors did on one occasion reach 20 minutes! Similarly the guides refined their presentation and developed ways of synchronizing the various elements of the experience around their successive groups of visitors, to the best effect. One participant, a sighted wheelchair user, was so interested in the audio aspect of the installation, he spent most of a week working in blackout.

Project Community & Ownership

During a project of this kind it is useful to assess the degree to which a project community is created. In this instance a community describes a collective sense of empowerment, where shared experiences are both discovered and develop through a democratic creative process. It is hoped that within this atmosphere of equality, participants are free to experiment with different roles within the group, and are thus facilitated in discovering or realising new aspirations. The strength of these feelings may correlate with the longevity of project achievement and the extent to which that community voice is noted in wider society.

Key to the development of relationships within the group was the fluid timetabling of formal sessions and informal time. This allowed maximum contact time between project staff and participants. This engendered a sense of equality and emphasised the importance of eating and taking breaks together which proved as important as work time in developing a sense of community and expanding mutual knowledge and understanding.

During the first brainstorming session at SARPV headquarters the group of participants were a mixture of either very vocal characters or fairly silent and more likely to offer a contribution when approached personally. This dynamic changed gradually over 2 days, as the process of garnering more materials through activities and discussion unfolded. The group became more conversational, less inclined to talk above one another, there were less personal guides present and the wheelchair users were, when necessary, taking the initiative to be responsible for leading around groups of the visually impaired. Crucial to the development of the group was the point at which the installation was fully assembled. Essential to the purpose of the installation was the idea of sensitizing the visitors through experiential means, thus all project members were physically able to feel their ideas by touring the gallery. From this point onward the level of interaction between group members increased, several individuals began to show an expanded sense of personal space, and the group inclination towards sitting in rows of chairs along the gallery walls changed so that the reception area and porch were spread with people standing in conversation. There was also an increase in people moving around independently, at times even recklessly. This was the beginning of complete group ownership of SITD.

Through each overlapping phase of creating SITD, from raising questions to finding new ways of articulating issues, to realising the installation and then running it, various transformations took place both at a group level and individually. The project was a combination of processes plus the sense of occasion afforded by the creation of an event to be delivered to the public over several days. This opens up a wealth of possible experiences for participants with many

different characters being well catered for by the diversity of jobs to be done around creating and managing this kind of event.

As a result of SITD this is an integrated community, which although it has grown out of a need to highlight disability issues, it is able to define itself in far broader terms than being a disability group, full stop. A visit to SITD to see the various participants taking on their respective roles around an environment in which they are the facilitators and teachers clarifies this. Within the simulated environment of SITD, blind participants especially, were necessarily relied upon by sighted visitors, and trusted for instruction.

Evaluation

Monitoring and evaluation took many forms:

- The organisers met at the end of each day for review and planning sessions
- A designated staff member was allocated the task of documentation of the process. He mingled with the participants throughout all stages of the project and provided on-going feedback.
- A more formal verbal evaluation was carried out by using interviews with the participants at the end of the project
- A graffiti wall was constructed at the exit of the installation where visitors were encouraged to write their impressions, thoughts and feelings. This captured rich and honest feedback which emphasised the emotional aspects of such a project. Some of the comments included:

“I don't know how to express my true feelings while inside this room. Working in this field for a number of years, I thought I had understood the problems faced by people with visual impairments – at least to some extent. How wrong I was ! “

“Before I entered the dark, I was the one with eyes, and my guide had no sight. But in the dark, he was the one with sight”

- SARPV and Healthlink Worldwide both carried out post-event reflections and held feedback sessions for other staff members. This consolidated the learning from the whole experience.

Significant highlights - small splashes, big ripples

- Critical reflection of the process led the lead organisations to examine their own practices as organisations. Soon after the event, SARPV organised a two day retreat / strategic planning session to work through many of the issues raised during the project. This was far reaching and impacted on their management and own organisational development.
- This is linked to the organisers' self assessment of their own management of the whole process and taking seriously comments from the various forms of evaluation. SARPV were extremely busy in the period prior to SITD, which we all know is reality for most organisations. Some of the planning was felt to be a little last minute and we realised that some of the potential for more participatory planning approaches was lost.
- Evaluation with the guides showed the strength of the impact of the power shift they experienced when they were leading sighted participants in the dark and highlighted the exclusion they experience elsewhere. One visually impaired participant simply said how much she 'enjoyed being in the dark because she was able to work with people and do tasks with them'
- The development of formal and informal networks – eg between visually impaired participants and also between NGOs.
- One visitor demanded the event be made a permanent feature in Dhaka. He had a visually impaired person in his family and explained that the installation helped him understand their situation more fully – it helped him understand 'what to do and what not to do in their company'
- Another visitor was a schoolchild. She questioned why she had never learned about disability in school and was going to ask her teachers to introduce the topic. Another

schoolchild has since campaigned that her school organises trips with disabled children

- The owner of the gallery instantly understood the importance of using different forms of expression in communication with, for and by different groups of people. He is a well known poet in Bangladesh and has since organised poetry and recitation sessions for people with disabilities to promote alternative and perhaps more appropriate outlet for their feelings.
- SARPV and Healthlink Worldwide have formed stronger links through working on such a project side by side as partners. This has opened spaces for honest critical reflection and mutual learning.
- SARPV staff feel they have been the ones to benefit most from the project – ‘it feels like the exhibition was for us although we meant it to be for other people’ SARPV staff have developed confidence to work with people with different (dis)abilities. One comment highlighted the importance of working alongside groups they usually worked ‘for’. SARPV also said they learned much about the skills and abilities of the visually impaired – ‘they are capable of many things we didn’t expect’. They also learned a lot about how they react around other groups and their own attitudes especially around physicality and touch
- The issue of abuse of a disabled girl child raised in the story broadcast in the garden room was felt to be an extremely important issue to communicate. It was reported that this was the first time the issue had been brought to the fore and inevitably created some discomfort amongst some visitors and even some of the participants.
- A number of NGOs from around Bangladesh have joined forces and are planning to continue to develop the project in future. They have campaigned locally and raised funds locally to such a point, where three more SITD experiences will be put on over the next 6 months drawing on the learning from this one.
- The problem of distinguishing the currency has been taken up by the press and a press conference has been organised by a leading disability NGO. SARPV have been successful in raising this issue with the Governor of the Bangladesh Government, who has agreed to take it forward.

The experience of this project reiterates the importance of the rationale behind its design - that is the implementation of experiential tools to advocate change. As an exercise in communicating actual physical experiences relevant to the lives of the most marginalised, it is only properly understood when experienced. Meticulous forward planning cannot fully prepare either participant groups or partner organisations to understand the implications of this work. Once the process of creating a simulated environment as a tool for communication has been experienced, and the physical reality of that environment has been felt, it is possible to begin the training process with a view to sustainability.

The above is extracts from a forthcoming article to be published by Mobility International USA

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