



The Irregular Art Schools team are a group of artists, organisations and researchers based in the Leeds City region, who are working to research inclusive artist development. Here they share an insight into the work achieved so far

Irregular Art Schools is a group of artists and academics with and without learning disabilities, who are working together to do research on inclusive artist development in Leeds. The project came about following a discussion about how being considered a 'professional' artist can be hard for learning disabled creatives. Often, traditional routes like higher education, engaging in arts criticism through peer groups or getting involved with artist-led communities are difficult opportunities for learning disabled artists to access. Many face considerable barriers and inequalities, and frequently rely on developing complex networks of support to pursue the arts.

As artist Alfie, a member of Leeds-based inclusive arts studio Pyramid and a core partner on the research, explains: 'I do not do art as therapy. I do it because I am an artist... I didn't get to study art at school or college. I asked to do art every year and they said I could at annual review but they never let me. That's why I left and came to Pyramid.'

In February 2021, with support from the Arts and Humanities Research Council, Irregular Art Schools was launched to explore these very issues. We are experimenting with new methods and partnerships, as well as working alongside social workers to bridge the gap between art and social care. We not only want to learn how to best support learning disabled artists in Leeds, but to also ask bigger questions about how we understand inclusive learning and development in the arts.

We've been inspired by Professor Roger Slee's book *The Irregular School*. He discusses how continuing to think in terms of the 'regular' school or the 'special' school obstructs progress towards inclusive education. Rather than separating learning and development into 'inclusive' or 'mainstream', 'regular' or 'special', we want

to experiment with making arts development opportunities 'irregular'. In our Irregular Art Schools, people with different life experiences, ways of knowing and ways of being can learn together side by side.

Who's involved?

Our project would not be possible without different individuals and organisations coming together. This includes artists who are members of inclusive arts studio Pyramid (Ria, Victor, Liam and Alfie, along with staff Alice C, Alice B, Debs, Pete and James) and artist-led studios and gallery Assembly House (Flo, Alice BB, Kev, Newt, Michael, Anne-Marie, Lily and Amelia). Also involved in this project are the staff and students from the School of Fine Art, History of Art at the University of Leeds, and staff from Leeds City Council's Adult Social Care Team. Working with these partners are two researchers, Jade French from the University of Leeds, who is a lecturer in Inclusive Arts Practice, and Katie Graham from the University of York, who is a lecturer in Social Work. We believe that this blend of expertise will help us best tackle the question of inclusive artist development.



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The project so far

Our project began at Pyramid. We noticed that the research team had different understandings, feelings and experiences of professional development, and we wanted to capture these differences so we could discuss them together as a group. We created our *Dictionary of Professional Development* as a way of recording and discussing the different meanings, both in words and pictures. During the project, lots of different people looked at our dictionary and added to it. The dictionary shows the diversity of experiences that artists encounter around their creative development.

We learnt that some artists view professional development as a good thing. They enjoy opportunities to stretch their thinking and try new things, recognising that, as human beings, we are all constantly learning and growing. But others felt it was a scary thing. It made them feel like they were not good enough and reduced them to being measured in very specific ways they didn't feel they had control over.

In January 2022, we began working with the project's second core partner, artist-led

community Assembly House based in Leeds. Artist-led spaces remain a vital part of the arts ecology, providing a community for many emerging artists to experiment, refine and develop their practice outside of formal education. Artist-led spaces typically comprise of studio and exhibition space, as well as development, social and networking opportunities for their membership. Crucially, however, and unlike inclusive arts studios, they are typically governed by the artists themselves through various co-operation models.

Though artist-led spaces are recognised as playing a key role due to their voluntary and grassroots nature, they are often inaccessible both in terms of their buildings and in terms of the support they can offer. Creative producer at Assembly House Alice Boulton-Breeze describes how 'This project has been transformative for the way we think about our building, artists and our future at Assembly House. Being in a heritage building, with all the access issues that presents, has often made us feel defeated, but working with the Pyramid artists has shown us what is possible and what we can do, despite some of the immovable limitations of the building; access is so much more than just whether we have stairs or not. Additionally, it has highlighted the endemic and unseen bias away from learning disabled artists working in grassroots spaces. It's easy to not see this, and this project has really revealed that this is ingrained in a lot of how these spaces operate.'

Since the project started, Pyramid artist Alfie has produced an access audit of Assembly House studios, which informed adjustments

made to the physical space. In terms of 'unseen bias', the collaborations and peer learning between the artists from these different studios has been powerfully productive for the development of individual practices and new perspectives on inclusion. Kev Devonport, an artist from Assembly House, explains, 'I think this project is groundbreaking in terms of challenging the exclusive society we live in. I'm in the process of collaborating via painting practices with artist Ria from Pyramid, inspired through similar life experiences involved with being encapsulated within different systems.'

What next?

In October 2022, we will begin our next strand of research by collaborating with the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds. We are hoping to explore, alongside staff and students, what it means to develop as artists within an art school setting. We hope to learn how our research group can access and use the university, and are really interested in understanding student's experiences of studying art at university – from crits, assessments and their studio environments to how creative communities are created and sustained. In the future, as Pyramid artist Liam explains, 'We'd love this research to make a difference to how artists at Pyramid can access a fine arts degree.' ■

Irregularartschools.org

1 Irregular Art School research workshop at Pyramid, 2022 © Jade French

2 Open studio display at Pyramid, artwork by Ria © Jade French

3 Assembly House © Assembly House

4 Poster © Irregular Art Schools, 2022

5 Path from Dictionary of Professional Development created by Irregular Art Schools research team © Jade French

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