

Post-training bulletin

# Intellectually disabled museum visitors



Stalowa Wola 2014

**Training:**

Increasing the accessibility of Polish and Ukrainian Museums  
for the professional service for the mentally disabled,  
Regional Museum in Stalowa Wola 2014, 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> February 2014

**Project:**

Museums without Barriers – Coalition of Polish and Ukrainian Museums  
for Provision of Professional Service to Disabled Visitors  
Cross-border Cooperation Programme Poland-Belarus-Ukraine 2007-2013

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**Editor:**

Anna Garbacz, Anna Szlązak, Ewelina Wiechnik

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# Introduction

The training courses on provision of service and education for the people with disabilities were aimed at museum guides and museum educators from Poland and Ukraine. The objective of the training courses was not only to educate but also to indicate new solutions, to formulate the educational programmes and to increase the sensibility and understanding of the problems and the expectations of the people with disabilities. The training courses were conducted in the form of workshops and were attended by the people with disabilities.

The training course on provision of service to the people with intellectual disability took place on 25<sup>th</sup> and 26<sup>th</sup> February 2014 at the Regional Museum in Stalowa Wola. This subtle and intricate issue was presented by Mireille Defreyne from Belgium. Moreover, Tomasz Wasilewski, a person on a wheelchair was talking about the physical/architectural obstacles in museums.

The training course was mostly based on the practical background, which was gradually complemented with theoretical background. The participants learnt about the different types of intellectual disability and the problems connected to disability. There were some theories indicated, such as the theory of divergent thinking by Ken Robinson (it opens the world of associations and thinking out-of-the-box, in a creative and surprising way). Many indications and ideas were born, which are connected to maximising the educational potential of the museums not only for the purpose of the people with disabilities.

The team work resulted in development of the programmes for the disabled, which were implemented in the participation of the disabled during the second training course conducted on the following day. The main actions were based on the educational program "My museum - your museum" created by the lecturer, although it was complemented by the new ideas of the participants of the training.



# About the lecturers:

## **Mireille Defreyne**

The Coordinator of the Centre of Expertise in the field of Cultural Heritage Education, KATHO Campus, Tielt; lecturer at the Catholic University of Leuven. The author of the innovative educational programme “My museum - your museum. Visiting the museums with the people with disabilities”, shed devised for the Regional Museum in Stalowa Wola. The author of numerous publications concerning cultural heritage and pedagogy.

## **Tomasz Wasielewski**

An entrepreneur and a social activist, the Secretary of the Dzieduszycki of Sas coat of arms Family Association. Since the year 2000, he has been on a wheelchair. In spite of his full-time professional involvement and his engagement in the numerous projects for the development of civic society, he is also a prominent exponent of the presence of the people with disabilities in the professional, social and cultural life.



Tomasz Wasielewski

# **Mental and architectural obstacles for the disabled visitors from the point of view of museum managers and visitors**

The general number of the disabled in Poland is estimated to amount to 15% of the society, i.e. about 5 million people. It is a big social group, which is worth fighting for because, in the long run, the activation and social inclusion of this group will result in better access to the cultural heritage, to the services offered by the institutions of culture and decrease the costs of care for this part of society. Moreover, the commercial aspect may also be important from the point of view of the museum managers.

Fortunately, the issue of access to the public buildings for the physically disabled is nowadays governed by various legal regulations and lies within the field of actions and interest of several official institutions (these are among others: the General Inspector of Building Control, the Human Rights Defender, the Supreme Audit Office, the Convention of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, the Podkarpackie Voivodeship Development Strategy until 2020 (concerning the Museum in Stalowa Wola). In addition, the number of accessible buildings is growing (in 2010 the number of museums accessible for the people on wheelchairs amounted to 235, out of the total 782 of museums in Poland; in comparison to 1999 the number increased by ca. 120%). Nonetheless, a more profound diagnosis of this phenomenon still indicates major shortcomings in the implementation of the postulate of participation of the disabled in the cultural life. This can be done by means of rendering cultural institutions accessible for the people with disabilities. So far only 40% of such buildings are accessible for the people with disabilities.

The considerations about the accessibility of a public utility building are only reasonable if they take into account not only the features most commonly enumerated in the reports such as: ramps, automatic doors, lifts and toilets accessible for the disabled but also the surroundings of the building, the entrance to the building, the pathway into the building, the service of the visitor inside the building, the system of information as well as all the technical assistance for people with all kinds of disabilities.

The architectural obstacles are not themselves the main problem and eliminating them will certainly not result in the instant influx of the disabled visitors to the institutions of culture. More importantly, there is something more to the presence of the disabled at the museums than just the adaptation of the building and its surroundings, namely the integrative function of the museums for the local communities and their role as the active moderator of the social and cultural life. Still, it is worth noticing that the lack of access to the buildings as such makes it not only difficult for the disabled to visit the institution but also makes it impossible for the disabled to work in this institution, which is a flagrant discrimination in the labour market. From the point of view of the managers of the museums, there are multifarious resistance to the presence (and also employment) of the people with disabilities in their surroundings.



These are, i.a. mental, financial and organisational resistance and also the age of the workers (these are mostly the elderly workers, who have to face something unknown), the location of the institution (a village/a town/a big city), which results in the mental stereotypes and the necessity to eliminate the architectural obstacles and installing some devices supporting also the people with mental disabilities. These are also obstacles limiting the activities and social inclusion, yet the people with disabilities and the institutions of culture (and especially their managers) can give each other a lot. Jointly, they can build a well-prospering mechanism, which on the one hand would be profitable for the museum and the other hand it would lift the mental and architectural obstacles and encourage the disabled for the participation in the cultural life in the role of recipients, creators and moderators. Speaking about people with disabilities, one most frequently underlines such notions as professional development, physical activity, the access to medical help, and very rarely the role of psycho-social activity/rehabilitation, cultural development and entrepreneurship.

It is necessary to look at the issue from a different perspective and try to perceive the institutions of culture, including the museums, in the market categories, as enterprises, which maintaining their character, can generate profits in both economic and social respects. In other words, their business activities can be implemented in the spirit of solid economy, which, implementing the traditional ideal of social market economy has to be understood as a principle of managing referring first and foremost to the human being. Only such an approach will open the institutions of culture to the disabled, awakening in them the feeling of being a subject and not an object of the cultural life and the statutory operations of the museums. This in turn will bond such people with invisible ties of mutual interest and engagement in the creation of the cultural offer. Having such an approach, it is easier to open the doors of the museums and create the offer also for the people with mental disabilities, which are unfortunately forgotten more easily than the people with physical disabilities. Such a way of perceiving the role of the museums will also result in the fact that the issues of universal design and lifting the communication obstacles will cease to be an aim in itself and will become an obvious tool in implementing much higher aims e.g. social inclusion and rightful participation in the social, cultural and economic life.

The engagement of the cultural institutions in creating the civic society is the most vital benefit (gain) for the state apart from just the mere tax revenue. The development of the entrepreneurship in the social and economic life requires deep inculcation of culture. The sustainable development has to be based on culture and after all scarcely any institution fulfils the role of the national heritage depository better than the museum. For this reason, one has to enhance the communication possibilities of the museums and make the social and economic milieu realize what the museum actually is and what it can become in the future, also resorting to the instruments of business activities. In this way, the museum is bound to become a natural point of interest and then the place of sojourn for the different social groups, including the people with disabilities.

Mirelle Defreyne

# The concept of 'Accessibility'

If a museum is a social place, then it is vital to ensure the access for all the potential visitors. So far, the museum has been under the rule of the local authorities and its director. Now, the general idea is the following:

**'our museum becomes a little bit yours'**

The concept of "accessibility" has become obviously useful. The accessibility is a term that directs the attention to the barriers for the intellectually disabled and their families or lecturers and tutors. For the museums, this notion is helpful in thinking about the manners, in which the barriers have excluded this target group (=>problem); at the same time, it makes one think about the ways to achieve inclusion (=>solution).

One interesting project (financed by the British Economic and Social Research Council) was implemented in 2009 in Great Britain upon the initiative of Melanie Nind and Jane Searle. They gathered the intellectually disabled, their caregivers and the people specialising in intellectual disability in order to jointly discuss the various meanings of the concept of 'accessibility'.

The 'multidimensional model' of 'accessibility' is one of the results of this discussion:

## 1. 'Help me find the way'

The physical accessibility of various objects (crucial but not satisfactory; the notion of accessibility reaches beyond the physical ability to enter or to approach).

Example: the intellectually disabled may easily lose their bearings in the museum, if they separate themselves from their group. Will it be easy for them to find their way to the toilet, visiting queue, etc?

Exercise: Which of these footprints would you apply to the respective parts of your museum, in order to guide the visitors?







The visitors in general do not like to lose their bearings, and neither do the intellectually disabled. It is important to devote certain amount of time to make them familiarise themselves with the surrounding space. It requires both time and information. Nonetheless the visitor should not be overloaded with the excessive amount of information.

- The people having learning difficulties do not usually have vast experience in visiting the places or cultural heritage sites and do not often know, what there is to be seen in such sites and how to best take advantage of the sightseeing or visiting opportunities.
- The person having a given difficulty in learning needs a greater number of shorter visits to a site in order to benefit from these visits to the most possible extent.
- The information is transmitted most effectively, if it is transmitted several times, in minor pieces.
- Some methods of ensuring accessibility may be applied to different cases, which means that a strategy devised for one group of people is also useful for a number of other groups.

The 'warm welcome' includes a wide range of factors, i.e. the personnel training, labelling or marking, showing around at the beginning of the visit as well as the colour systems.

- There are no symbols used which could facilitate the interpretation, and if they are used, they are inconsistent.
- Most of the sites are characterised by unclear labelling or marking that should facilitate finding one's way.
- Clear, bright labelling or marking is needed based on symbols.
- Labelling or marking that specifies what can be done in the respective spaces is needed (e.g. what can be touched, where one can sit, etc.).
- It is helpful to apply the colour codes for showing directions. Contrasting colours of the floors and the walls will define the specific space.
- The labels have to be clearly visible. It has to be obvious what they refer to.
- One should at all cost avoid the flood of information and as far as their graphics (typographics) are concerned, they should be contrasting.

The simplified text including the key pieces of information has to be used jointly with the appropriate symbols/images.



## 2. 'I want to learn something new'

The intellectually disabled also want to learn new things. They want to acquire knowledge about matters of their interest.

Example: specific and abstract vocabulary; the selection of artefacts...

Exercise: think about the training no 1 and think of the contents which could be interesting for the people with intellectual disability.

- the applied media
  - the level of language
  - contemplative or based on experience/experiment to a great extent
- 
- The more senses are engaged, the more effective the visit to the museum becomes
  - The sound should be applied to a larger extent, whereas it is important not to muffle the sound and to avoid playing many sounds at the same time.
  - The audio text heard upon pushing the button is kindly welcomed (or rather: kindly heard).
  - The videos and music create the atmosphere of the specific place and reduce the significance of the text in order to gain access to the information.
  - Interactive computer games are highly popular.
  - The exhibits enabling physical contact or particular activities create the space characterised by the high level of accessibility, nonetheless such possibilities are currently limited.
  - The exhibits have to be characterised by significant contrasts of colours and textures in order to ensure the access for everyone.

## 3. 'I do not want to feel helpless'

It is all about the feeling of power, the feeling that one has influence over one's own ability to gain and retain the access.

Example: **People as effective resources**

- The museum guide is the most effective facilitator of accessibility, who interacts with people and on the spot adapts the form of the transmitted information in response to the reactions of the visitors and the level of their understanding.
- Applying the costumes will breathe new life into the specific space.
- Facilitated materials available for the guides in the respective rooms will be helpful for the personnel as well as for the visitors, facilitating the presentation of the given exhibit as well as of the artefacts.

## 4. 'Make me feel welcomed'

It is about mutual relationships and communication, about the personal facilitation and personal interaction.

Example: The way, in which people are welcomed on entering the museum or on the exhibition site. The visitor has to experience physical comfort right from the start in order to be able to take pleasure in visiting.



Example: Is it possible also for the museum guard to communicate with the intellectually disabled visitors?

- On entering the museum, the people having specific learning difficulties must feel welcomed.
- The disability awareness training has to be conducted for all the museum staff members. The intellectually disabled people should participate in the training.
- A considerable number of seats has to be accessible in the museum building.

## **5. 'Accept me as I am, with the knowledge I possess'**

**'Help me understand and speak'**

**'Help me choose and give me some control over the situation'**

The disabled person should be 'his or her own advocate'. Making choices and declaring them is a notion related to accessibility.

Example: Can an intellectually disabled person make his or her own choices?

Exercise: Which choices could be made by an intellectually disabled person in your museum?

## **6. 'Let me participate'**

The intellectually disabled people also have the right to be a part of a group and participate in organised events or democratic processes.

See training no 3: the example of the Gaasbeek Castle in Belgium

## **7. 'Satisfy my basic needs';'**

**I have come here to spend some time with my family and friends'**

It is about the quality of life (belonging to the community, taking advantage from independence/co-dependency and social networks)

Example: Is it allowed/encouraged to interact with the intellectually disabled people?

Such model is helpful, since it refers to the complexity of museums as places, spaces, sites, collections, ideas, interactions and actors in the public policy. It is not sufficient to adapt the building museum to some extent, to adjust collections or presentation of collections.



## Exercises and good practices that can be used at Your Museum:

### task 1: the participants get to know each other

- Stand in a circle or around a table or sit down in a circle on the floor (the participants should be able to establish eye contact with everyone, not only with the leader)
- Introduce oneself: My name is.... : it is vital for everyone to participate in this task (including the guests and educators)
- What do you like doing? (educators and guests)
- What don't you like doing?
- A handshake after a while (first contact respecting the distance, and then diminishing the distance)
- The presence of the caregiver of an intellectually disabled person is significant, they know every person individually and can interrupt the task whenever they notice that the person performing the task does not feel well doing it.
- The mediation is necessary for the group interaction: if one person speaks all the time, the mediator should take the initiative in order to stimulate the discussion, nevertheless, the participants cannot be forced to talk.

### task 2: showing the visitors around the museum

(rooms, toilets, shops: showing what can and what cannot be touched the visitors should be told whether they can speak out loud or remain silent...)

If the visitors know the museum, they can be allowed to show their tutors around the museum rooms. Performing the task is connected to a huge responsibility and it is a great success for them to undertake it.

### task 3: visiting the exhibition

#### Group 1 (first floor)

- Classes at info-kiosks: the tutor encourages to play, the participants show the clouds containing <<WAW>> and clap their hands; motivation is crucial in order to be able to play together
- the opportunity to dye the cloth: the tutor supports the visitor in performing the task

#### Group 2 (second floor)

- The task for the educators and guests (e.g. in the teams of two: an educator and a teacher): look at everything that generates the sound, then come back and use your mouth and body trying to repeat the sound generated by the object. The rest tries to guess what sound it is and clap their hands to show that they know the answer. It is an extremely interesting way to visit the museum in an unusual way.
- The intellectually disabled people think on their own what generates the given sound, they have the choice, they should not be hinted nor suggested what is right or wrong.



### **Group 3 (outdoor activity)**

- in the case of lack of a prominent leader of the group and if there is a strong leader among the educators: one tutor against the guests;
- the tutor should not try to control everything, should be versatile and spontaneous;
- the tutor is versatile and makes the participants aware that this is a contest and therefore one has to vote, everyone has a choice and everyone does the same - the mood in the group is getting better

### **Task 4**

- Searching for materials that are hidden in the exhibition rooms: clay sculptures, crayons, threads, colours, etc... (the participants themselves will decide what they will use)
- All the educators and guests gather once again in the respective groups, around the same table
- There is this need to help one another in order to make everyone actively participate in the classes.
- Some of the participants are artistically gifted. Their works show their impressions gained during the visit to the museum. In this way, one can see their personality, their intrinsic characteristics, what they are interested in and you, as a tutor will get some insight into their mind and heart.







[www.muzeum.stalowawola.pl](http://www.muzeum.stalowawola.pl)