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THE BIG THING

**Guidelines on inclusion and accessibility for
organizers, organizations and other public
institutions**

Arkhe



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Opening Note

The Big Thing was a different training, at least different from what we, as trainers, usually do. I am still wondering for whom this experience was more meaningful, the participants or the trainer's team?

The way we planned the learning process focused on providing accessible learning spaces for all. The reason for this came from previous experiences in which, having a mixed group, with participants with and without disabilities, at some point along the way those activities were not so inclusive, the learners with disabilities often struggled to keep up on the learning path, because we, as trainers, could be able to adapt to their needs, but the rest of the group (the ones without disabilities) might not. Just as the physical space needs to be accessible, the materials must be adapted to the different accessibility needs, additionally the rhythm of the learning must be taken into consideration. Working with deaf participants means working with sign language interpreters, and interpretation takes time. Working with blind participants means descriptions and explanations from accompanying persons, and that too takes time. Working with wheelchair users means that the accessible way is longer, the elevator gets stuck... and that also takes time. Having parallel processes, in which each group could learn following their own path, having a common goal, made sense. Perhaps, the biggest challenge, was to bring them all together in the same room and let them develop their own learning process together.

Another difference with other trainings was that, at the end of the day, the team meeting did not include only the trainers, but sign language interpreters, accompanying persons, personal assistants... because we all were a team, and it was important to listen to each other concerns, and understand what was going to happen the next day, where would they be needed the most, how to balance the energy...

Both trainings, national and transnational, were an incredible example of teamwork in which individuals played a very important role, bringing their own values, experiences, expertise and needs. Together we build an accessible learning path and we, trainers, only supported the process bringing topics, principles, competences and methods that would facilitate the discovery of what, for each participant, being a trainer means.

You will not find in this document a guide of methods and activities to use in your trainings, instead you'll find recommendations, the outcomes of our own learning process as trainers in *The Big Thing*, which might be useful in your future practice. Today some of those recommendations feel like pure logic for us, but six or eight months ago, they were incredible realizations.

We hope that what you will find in the following pages will encourage you to take the next step in this diverse world, that you are not afraid of working with participants and trainers with disabilities, and that you recognise they are essential if we want to talk about inclusion and accessibility.

We wish you a beautiful and inclusive learning experience.

Viki H. Alonso (Trainers' team coordinator)

Everything is possible when you have the right support.

Movement is key for those who talk with their bodies.

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1. Introduction

The Big Thing (TBT) is an Erasmus+ Partnership for Cooperation project whose main objective is to promote the inclusion of people with diverse abilities in youth work and non-formal education across Europe. TBT focuses on empowering young people by providing them with the necessary skills, knowledge, attitudes and competences to develop and implement inclusion-based training programmes.

This project directly involved 21 young people with functional diversity, including people with hearing impairments, wheelchair users and people with visual impairments. By basing their training on the ETS competence model, TBT ensured that participants have received quality preparation to become trainers and facilitators in non-formal education and youth participation settings.

This guide is the key outcome of *The Big Thing* project: a structured tool designed to provide trainers, facilitators, youth workers, social organizations, and public institutions with practical recommendations for creating of inclusive learning environments. It offers concrete strategies and methodologies to improve and design new spaces, materials and dynamics based on the specific needs of different groups of young people with diverse abilities. By encouraging and promoting these practices, this guide aims to create a more inclusive and equitable environment in youth work and non-formal education.

The Big Thing project is a collaborative effort between three partner organizations:

- **Arkhe** (Spain): An organization with over 20 years of experience in developing and implementing non-formal education activities, focusing on inclusion, equality, and social engagement. Through summer camps, rural and neighbourhood revitalisation and international mobility projects under Erasmus +, Arkhe supports the development of people and communities in rural areas. Arkhe coordinates TBT due to the identified need to train and work with trainers with disabilities in rural areas.
- **ZAVOD ODTIZ** (Slovenia): An institute with over 13 years of experience in delivering educational, research, social and other non-profit activities. They are dedicated to inclusion and to creating a junction of opportunities for disabled and non-disabled individuals, with a strong commitment to empower especially those with physical disabilities by encouraging their active participation. ODTIZ Institute joined the TBT project because they advocate for increasing the number of physically disabled trainers in non-formal education, as they strongly believe that their unique perspective and experiences are a great asset to the world of Erasmus+ and youth work.
- **IEWS International** (Belgium): European non-governmental organization working to promote the independence, mobility, and social inclusion of young people with visual impairments. Through international mobility projects under Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps, IEWS supports visually impaired youth in developing autonomy and confidence, whether through volunteering, training, or internships. IEWS International joined “*The Big Thing*” project to help make youth work and non-formal education more inclusive and accessible. With accessible methodologies and diverse and inclusive learning environments, more persons with visual impairments will have real opportunities to develop as trainers and facilitators — on equal footing with their peers.

2. Creating an inclusive environment for participants with disabilities

This section provides general guidance for organizers, organizations and other public institutions working with diverse groups, particularly those including participants with varying abilities and needs. Creating an inclusive learning environment means going beyond “one-size-fits-all” approaches and embracing flexibility, adaptability, and participant-centered planning. The following practices focus on methodologies, materials, human resources, and individual needs to help organizations build truly inclusive spaces.

2.1 Logistical arrangements

When planning to implement projects that involve participants with diverse abilities, being well prepared in terms of logistical arrangements is crucial, as it can contribute greatly to your participants’ well-being and satisfaction, and consequently to a better overall success of your projects.

When thinking about logistics, the following elements are advised to be considered:

- **A good preparation before project implementation:** Organize an online or in-person Partners' Meeting where you can get to know your project partners better. Prepare a good Application Form for your future participants that will allow you to get acquainted with their specific needs and preferences beforehand. Prepare an infopack for your participants that will include all of the important information they need to know before coming to the project.
- **Inquire about accessible and adapted transportation:** If you are planning to include participants with diverse abilities in your projects, you will most likely need adapted transportation for them, so be sure to check for availability and options for adapted transport in the area of where your project is going to be happening. Specific requirements regarding adaptations in transportation will depend on the needs of your participants.
- **Inquire about accessible accommodation:** If you are planning to include participants with diverse abilities in your projects, you will need accommodation that is accessible and tailored to their needs, so be sure to check for availability and options for appropriate accommodation in the area of where your project is going to be happening. Specific requirements regarding accessibility of the accommodation will depend on the needs of your participants.
- **Plan well for additional help and assistance beforehand:** It depends on the needs of your specific participants, but if you wish to include participants with diverse abilities in your project do not forget also to include sufficient support staff for them and plan your project budget accordingly.
- **Inquire about nutrition and medication needs:** Participants with diverse abilities might have specific needs when it comes to their nutrition and medications, so be sure to check for their dietary requirements, allergies etc. beforehand and prepare everything accordingly on project location, as much as it is possible.

- **Organize an Advance Planning Visit (APV):** An organized APV for project partners and participants allows for the adequacy of all of the above mentioned elements to be checked in person and on project location before the implementation, so that the additional adaptations, if needed, can be made before the actual arrival of participants.

2.2 Methodologies and Methods

Inclusive learning begins with intentional planning and a willingness to adapt your methods to the group in front of you. This section explores foundational approaches like Universal Design for Learning and experiential learning, while offering practical suggestions to improve clarity, communication, and flexibility. By designing with accessibility in mind from the beginning, trainers can create rich learning experiences for all participants. Trainers are encouraged to:

- **Follow the principles of Universal Design for Learning.** Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that supports the design of learning experiences that are accessible and engaging for everyone. UDL encourages flexibility in how information is presented, how participants express what they know, and how they stay engaged in the process. Integrating UDL principles means thinking ahead to remove barriers and offering multiple ways for participants to learn and contribute.
- **Communicate clearly and simply.** Avoid jargon and complex metaphors. Use straightforward language and support your message with multiple formats—verbal, visual, and written. This not only respects diverse learning styles but also enhances understanding. Make it a habit to pause and check for comprehension, encouraging participants to ask questions or request clarification.
- **Plan ahead and structure activities.** Provide clear instructions, calendars, and agendas well before each activity. Break activities into manageable steps with flexible timelines. Setting expectations early around participation and behavior helps establish a safe and respectful space where everyone knows what to expect.
- **Use experiential learning.** Hands-on activities — like those involving movement, sensory elements, or creative expression — create richer, more inclusive learning environments. Always pair experiential learning with reflection: give participants time and space to process what they experienced and relate it to their own contexts.
- **Be ready to adapt.** Flexibility is key. Participants may need adjustments to the schedule, method, or pace of activities. Be open to experimenting, learning as you go, and changing plans based on what's working. Managing time differently — allowing for slower pacing or extra time for transitions — can make a big difference.
- **Create and seize feedback opportunities.** Build in regular accessible opportunities to give and receive feedback throughout the training process. Use a variety of feedback methods to ensure all participants can contribute. Adjust the training experience based on this input to continuously improve inclusivity.

2.3 Materials and Tools

Materials and tools are the backbone of any project activity, and making them accessible is essential. This section outlines how to provide materials in multiple formats, leverage assistive technologies, and integrate both digital and sensory tools to ensure everyone can engage comfortably and confidently.

- **Make materials accessible.** Ensure that all materials are available in a variety of accessible formats, such as large print, Braille, easy-to-read language, or digital

formats compatible with screen readers. Also consider providing visual alternatives or sign language interpretation where needed.

- **Integrate assistive technologies.** Be prepared to accommodate different technological needs, including captioning tools, Braille displays, and magnification software. Collaborate with participants to identify and provide what they need to engage fully.
- **Use collaborative and sensory tools.** Digital tools like Google Drive, Padlet, or Trello can promote real-time collaboration and information sharing. Sensory tools — like textured materials or calming scents — can enhance comfort and focus, especially in longer sessions.

2.4 Human Resources

People are at the heart of inclusive projects. From interpreters and assistants to co-facilitators with lived experience, this section highlights how human resources contribute to an inclusive training environment. Clear roles, strong communication, and mutual respect are key to ensuring everyone involved can support participants effectively.

- **Work with interpreters and assistants.** Support staff such as interpreters or personal assistants play a vital role in fostering inclusion. Include them in planning discussions, share materials ahead of time, and ensure they're part of regular team meetings to stay aligned with participant's needs.
- **Consider co-facilitation.** Co-facilitation, particularly with trainers who have lived experience of disability or functional diversity, can enrich the learning space and promote equality. Communicate openly with co-facilitators and participants alike, and ensure that everyone feels respected in their role and contributions.

2.5 Specific Needs

Inclusion means understanding and responding to the specific needs of each individual. This section provides guidance on gathering information from participants, designing accessible environments, and supporting autonomy. It also encourages awareness of intersectionality and the complex identities that shape how people experience your training space.

- **Tailor your approach.** Each participant brings unique needs, strengths, and preferences. Use intake forms, interviews, or informal conversations to understand individual needs without making assumptions. Treat each person as an expert in their own experience.
- **Consider accessibility in all dimensions.** Ensure that venues are physically accessible and that communication supports (like interpreters or captioning) are in place. Transportation, lighting, signage, and sound should all be considered in planning.
- **Encourage autonomy and agency.** Support participants in being as independent as possible, offering help only when it's needed or requested. Foster an environment where everyone feels confident and capable of contributing meaningfully.
- **Respect intersectionality.** Recognize that diversity isn't one-dimensional. Participants may navigate multiple identities and experiences that shape how they engage. Be attentive to these overlapping dynamics and be ready to adjust your approach if new challenges or needs arise.
- **Be adaptable.** Adapt project content, delivery, methods and schedule's to accommodate the evolving needs of all participants.

3. Responding to the specific requirements of participants with hearing, visual and physical impairments

Ensuring inclusive learning environments for people with disabilities requires an understanding of the specific needs associated with different types of impairments and a commitment to adapting training spaces, materials, and methods accordingly. This section presents guidance tailored to three groups commonly underrepresented in training environments: participants with hearing impairments, visual impairments, and physical impairments.

Creating inclusive environments for these participants requires a holistic and flexible approach, informed by experience, communication, and collaboration. The guidance offered here is based on practices and lessons learned from *The Big Thing* project and is meant to support organizers in planning, delivering, and evaluating accessible learning opportunities.

3.1 Persons with Hearing impairments

Ensuring inclusive learning environments for people with hearing impairment is essential, and requires a thorough understanding of the diversity within this group, and careful planning of each stage of the learning process.

Hearing impairments cover a wide spectrum: from profoundly deaf participants who use sign language to those with hearing difficulties who rely on lip-reading or spoken language with other technical support.

Each participant has unique preferences and needs that must be recognised and integrated into the training methodology, resources, and overall approach to participation.

Creating an inclusive environment also requires a thorough understanding of the variety of communication preferences and access needs within the deaf and hard of hearing community.

Institutions must recognise that hearing impairments do not manifest themselves uniformly; some participants use sign language as their primary medium, some use hearing aids, some use spoken language, some use lip reading, etc. Therefore, accessibility measures must be comprehensive, proactive and flexible, integrated into the structural design of every training or educational experience.

The following sections describe institutional strategies for planning, delivering and evaluating training activities that effectively meet the needs of people with hearing impairment, based on the practices, experiences, and findings developed through *The Big Thing* project.

3.1.1. Logistical arrangements tailored to the group's specific requirements

Logistical planning should take into account different criteria to adapt spaces and dynamics and resources to the specific needs of this group:

- **Space allocation:**

Working, meeting, or conference spaces should allow for an unobstructed line of sight between participants, trainers, and interpreters. This implies a careful distribution of the physical space so that deaf participants can simultaneously see the content of the presentation or poster being presented. Rooms should be free of visual obstacles, with interpreters close to the visual displays or trainers, rather than to the side.

Lighting should be sufficient and even ensuring that facial expressions and hand movements are clearly visible.

- **Working with interpreters:**

It is recommended to work with interpreters familiar with the International Sign System, as this facilitates multilingual communication at international events. Institutions should budget for at least two interpreters per session, rotating regularly in shifts to reduce fatigue.

It is also recommended to include interpreters in the preparation, development and evaluation phases, and to provide them in advance with the objectives of each session, the profiles of the working groups and the visual materials to be used. This allows them to prepare for the specific terminology of the subject matter, and to anticipate the possible reactions of participants to the complexity of the content or dynamics.

For full inclusion, interpreters should also be present at the moments of relaxation and social interaction and any informal meetings contained in the training programme.

3.1.2. Suggested materials and need-oriented tools

The availability and accessibility of materials requires special attention because of their significant influence on the learning experience of hearing impaired participants. Institutions should ensure that all materials (written, visual or digital) are adapted to meet the needs of diverse communication preferences.

- **Written materials:** should be provided in the participant's preferred language and adapted for easy reading, using plain language principles. If the participant uses sign language as a first language, this may also include simplified texts or the use of visual aids to clarify meaning.
- **Video material:** Videos should be subtitled or interpreted in sign language and any oral presentation should be accompanied by real-time subtitles wherever possible, in addition to relevant interpretation.
- **Visual facilitation tools:** The use of diagrams, icons, colour-coded guides and infographics should be prioritised over dense written text. Institutions should support trainers, interpreters and supporters in the use of large format posters, tactile or spatial tools that allow participants to interact with the content physically and visually. Such materials should support not only knowledge transfer, but also reflection, evaluation or social interaction processes.
- **Accessibility:** Early access to materials is essential. Resources provided to hearing impaired participants should be provided with training resources, session schedules and visual content prior to the start of the training. This facilitates adequate preparation and reduces cognitive demands during real-time interpretation. Institutions can support this by creating shared digital folders or distributing printed information and infographics in advance at the training venue.

3.1.3. Recommendations when working with human resources for this specific group

Human resources (interpreters): Institutions must approach human resources planning and management with inclusion in mind from the outset. Sign language interpreters are not simply a supplementary support, they are critical to the success of inclusive training environments for hearing impaired participants. Institutions should recruit professional interpreters with proven expertise in both the relevant sign language (national or international) and, where possible, in the content area of the training.

A minimum of two interpreters per session is required to ensure continuous coverage without compromising performance. For long or intensive events, three interpreters may be necessary.

An adequate budget should be allocated for interpretation services, usually starting at €400 per day per interpreter, on average, internationally.

The role of interpreters should be clearly defined. They are not facilitators or trainers, and should not be expected to explain content beyond their accurate translation. However, they should be considered as full members of the team, invited to all planning meetings, and granted access to preparatory materials. This fosters better communication, and allows interpreters to anticipate specific moments when additional clarification may be needed.

Staff training: Trainers and other staff should be trained on how to work effectively with interpreters and hearing impaired participants. They should address deaf participants directly, avoid speaking with their backs to the group, and also avoid asking interpreters to summarise or exclude information. Respect for the autonomy of the deaf participants is expressed through direct and equal communication.

In addition to interpreters, institutions should consider the involvement of hearing impaired facilitators. This not only enriches the diversity of the training team, but also fosters inclusion and gives participants role models to identify with.

3.1.4. How to address individual inclusion needs in this specific group

The effective inclusion of all hearing impaired participants depends on the early identification of the communicative needs and preferences of each one of them, and the prior and continuous adaptation of methods and methodologies to these needs.

Institutions should collect information on these preferences, and develop training and informational materials tailored to them. Prior experiences of each participant in training environments should be compiled to inform planning.

In addition, information on the support expectations of each participant should continue to be collected in a continuously and systematically, using tools such as surveys, questionnaires, interviews, etc.

Uninterrupted access to interpretation for participants who use sign language should be ensured, not only during sessions, but throughout the training program, including informal and break-out spaces, coffee breaks, meals, and social events. An important part of the relational dynamics also takes place in these settings, and there are numerous opportunities for learning in non-formal or informal meetings.

Hearing-impaired participants require different logistical support strategies. These include continuous visibility of the speaker's face at all times, avoiding obstructions such as masks or low lighting. In addition, it is important to keep an even pace and tone of the presentations suitable.

Whenever possible, access to real-time captioning tools or speech-to-text applications should be ensured to facilitate comprehension. These tools should be tested in advance to ensure compatibility and proper functioning within the training environment.

When working with mixed groups of deaf participants (with different communication needs and preferences) it is essential to plan for multimodal communication. This may involve:

- Providing the main content in visual, written, and online formats
- Clarifying the communication preferences of each participant beforehand
- Allowing extra time for transitions between content and sessions, and group discussions
- Ensuring the presence of interpreters and appropriate space allocation

Creating moments for group review, individual reflection, and shared feedback also helps to identify any changing needs. Institutions must be flexible and willing to adapt materials, formats and schedules in response to the feedback from participants.

Inclusion, in this sense, has greater significance than support; it signals a structural commitment to human rights, human dignity, and participation. Institutions that adopt this approach will not only address the needs of hearing impaired participants, but will also contribute to broader cultural change and the development of inclusive learning spaces.

3.2 Persons with visual impairments

Creating accessible and empowering learning environments for participants with visual impairments requires intentional planning, adaptive methods, and a commitment to inclusion throughout every phase of training. This guidance draws on the experience of VIEWS International, particularly from the Belgian National Training Session, where young people with visual impairments participated in both online and in-person training formats.

Visual impairments vary widely — from partial sight to complete blindness — and may be accompanied by other accessibility considerations, such as reduced mobility. Some individuals use screen readers or magnification tools, while others rely on tactile markers or personal assistance. Inclusive training must accommodate this diversity by embedding accessibility into logistics, materials, team composition, and facilitation strategies from the outset.

The following guidance outlines good practices for organizing, delivering, and evaluating inclusive training sessions involving participants and trainers with visual impairments, based on the practices, experiences and findings developed through The Big Thing project.

3.2.1. Logistical arrangements tailored to the group's specific requirements

Logistics should focus on supporting autonomy, clarity, and spatial orientation, allowing participants with visual impairments to engage with confidence and independence.

- **Venue accessibility**

Select training spaces that are free of architectural barriers and obstacles, creating a layout that promotes independent mobility. The venue should always accommodate mobility aids, such as guide dogs or wheelchairs, with clear circulation paths and materials placed at appropriate heights for easy access. It's also helpful to include tactile markers on doors, allowing participants to easily distinguish between rooms and navigate the venue with more comfort.

- **Environmental preparation**

Set up rooms in advance with a consistent layout (e.g. chairs in a circle or tables for group work). These arrangements help ensure that during training sessions, participants can freely move around the room to fully engage in practical activities. It also allows them to familiarize themselves with the room's layout and the proximity of others, aiding in their spatial awareness within the space. If changes are necessary, make them during breaks and communicate clearly. Be mindful of lighting and sound, avoiding anything that might cause discomfort or disorientation.

- **Spatial orientation**

Provide a guided walk-through at the beginning of the course to familiarize participants with the space. Use clear verbal cues to describe the layout and key reference points. It's important to check in with each participant to see if they prefer to navigate independently or with some assistance. For longer training sessions, ensure that participants are acquainted with all the spaces they'll be using, such as the cafeteria, bathrooms, and any outdoor areas.

- **Breaks and transitions**

Scheduling regular breaks and allocating some extra time before and after each activity allows participants with visual impairments time to reorient themselves if the space has changed, and to set up necessary tools for the upcoming activity. These breaks also allow everyone to familiarize themselves with the materials at hand and connect with the ideas and activities of other participants, particularly in mixed groups, fostering collaboration. Ensure there's adequate time for everyone to move between spaces or prepare for the next session.

- **Quiet spaces for rest and recovery:**

Offer a quiet, low-stimulation area where participants can rest, recharge, or simply take a moment for themselves. This can be especially helpful for those who may experience fatigue or sensory overload during the day.

3.2.2. Suggested materials and need-oriented tools

Accessible materials are essential and must be proactively prepared, not retrofitted. The Belgian training highlighted several effective practices.

- **Digital formats:** To ensure accessibility of preparatory materials as well as training documents, use Google Docs or Microsoft Word with consistent structure, accessible headings, and alt-text for images. Use high-contrast text and logical document flow. During the TBT national training course, Belgian participants found Google Suite particularly effective for screen reader compatibility. Avoid scanned PDFs and inaccessible Excel files—replacing them with platforms like Microsoft Forms when possible.
Reference frameworks from the European Blind Union, the European Disability Forum, or the W3C Web Accessibility Initiative (WAI) and the ADD@ME project for document design.
- **Tactile and physical resources:** when Braille is not applicable (and only provide it if the participant explicitly uses it), use tactile markers, textured shapes, or large-print labels. For poster-making and other visual activities, use textured elements such as yarn, foam shapes, or plasticine to enable tactile participation.
- **Technology access:** trainers or participants may need laptops with screen readers (e.g. NVDA or JAWS) and time to familiarize themselves with the venue and materials beforehand. During the TBT national training in Belgium, shared digital folders with resources and schedules were well received and helped participants prepare independently.
- **Online platforms:** for online training sessions, prefer platforms like Google Meet, which were confirmed by blind participants as screen reader compatible. As the digital literacy skills may vary across participants to provide pre-tested navigation guides with key shortcuts and features, to ensure a smooth and fully inclusive experience.

3.2.3 Recommendations when working with human resources for this specific group

Inclusive training depends on qualified, well-prepared support personnel. Accompanying persons and assistants ensure that participants with visual impairments are fully involved in the content, activities, and environment, and that they can freely and independently move around the venue and connected areas.

They provide orientation support and guiding individuals between spaces and helping them feel confident in unfamiliar settings, ensuring participants can navigate the environment safely and with ease, including support during coffee breaks and meals. Beyond physical guidance, assistants also play a key role in enabling full participation in the learning process by describing visual elements, supporting group interactions, and helping to ensure that all participants can engage meaningfully in discussions and activities.

This role is particularly important during international activities that take place in unfamiliar or partially inaccessible settings.

Accompanying persons for visually impaired attendees are required to:

- Have solid digital skills and feel confident using common tools and platforms
- Be a good communicator, able to respond to specific needs with clarity and care
- Be comfortable speaking English, especially in a diverse, international environment
- Be ready to support the trainer by explaining or clarifying any unclear instructions
- Have some prior experience supporting people with visual impairments

When working with larger groups of participants with visual impairments, it is important to anticipate the need of multiple accompanying people, to ensure smooth facilitation and support during delivery and breaks.

When multiple assistants are involved, roles should be clearly distributed to avoid overload. Daily debriefs between trainers and assistants ensure smooth adaptation to participants' feedback. Trust is crucial: participants should be encouraged to select assistants from their own networks where possible.

3.2.4. How to address individual inclusion needs in this specific group

Inclusion is most effective when support is personalised, flexible, and rooted in the participants' lived experience. A one-size-fits-all approach is rarely sufficient—trainers must remain attentive and responsive to individual needs as they evolve throughout the course. Proactive communication, adaptable methods, and a respect for autonomy are all key to creating an empowering learning environment.

Early contact

Reach out well in advance of the training to understand each participant's preferences. Ask about tools, formats, assistance levels, and prior experiences. During the Belgian training, participants highlighted specific needs related to digital platforms, navigation, and sensitivity to lighting — insights that helped shape more responsive planning.

Continuous communication

Use one-on-one meetings, informal check-ins, and feedback forms to monitor evolving needs. For instance, the Belgian national course relied on WhatsApp and similar tools to maintain an open channel of communication, helping trainers adjust support in real time.

Adaptive facilitation

Avoid relying solely on visual cues. Prepare adaptive materials such as “speaking objects” (e.g. a sound-making item or textured ball) to support turn-taking and group interaction. In one example, VIEWS used a stone as a tactile cue during discussions. For silent or poster-based activities, accessible formats were ensured through the use of screen reader–friendly digital tools or tactile alternatives.

Balancing support and autonomy

Trainers should support participants in defining and maintaining their own boundaries. While some may prefer assistance with navigation or tasks, others may opt to explore independently or with a chosen companion. This autonomy should be respected and facilitated wherever possible.

Encouraging peer support and positive group dynamics

Intentional efforts should be made to foster a welcoming and inclusive group atmosphere. Introduce ice-breaking activities that allow participants to connect beyond the formal training content. Encourage mutual assistance and the sharing of lived experiences in a way that promotes solidarity while avoiding dynamics of pity or hierarchy.

Assigning small group tasks, encouraging co-facilitation opportunities, or creating informal buddy systems can help build trust and empower participants to support each other in ways that feel natural and respectful. Positive peer interaction not only reinforces individual confidence, but also enriches the overall learning experience.

3.3 Persons with physical impairments

In order to ensure the creation of inclusive training spaces for people with physical impairment, choosing the space with the right characteristics to carry out the trainings is crucial, together with choosing the appropriate materials and tools for usage, according to their abilities. Flexibility in adjusting training methodologies on the fly is also very important when working with this target group, as well as taking into account the additional human resources that need to be included in the training sessions, in order to ensure equal active participation for everyone, as much as possible. It is important to remember that physical impairment means a wide and diverse spectrum of individuals with varying needs and preferences.

This section deals with different strategies that have proven to be effective and useful for trainers working with this particular target group, as well as for the participants from this target group.

The following guidance outlines good practices for organizing, delivering, and evaluating inclusive training sessions involving participants and trainers with physical impairments, based on the practices, experiences, and findings developed through *The Big Thing* project.

3.3.1. Logistical arrangements tailored to the group's specific requirements

The organization and the implementation of the logistics of the project activity turns out to be a very important factor in the overall success of your project, especially if the project group includes people with physical impairments.

- **Preparation and partner coordination**

In the project preparation phase knowing your project partners first of all and having a good relationship with them are key elements. Reliable and experienced partners will provide you with support in terms of organization of inclusive activities and all logistics, which must be adapted accordingly to the group of young people you (will) work with.

It is advised to organize an online or in-person Partners' Meeting where project partners can get acquainted better and reach a mutual agreement about the way of work during the project activity. In this way, partner organizations can better communicate with each other regarding various circumstances, rules, and implementation, thereby reducing risks during the project itself.

Then it is also very important to get to know the specific participants and their needs well in this preparation phase. This is why it is advised to prepare a Project Application Form for participants, with questions regarding their personal information, needs and preferences. The gathered information about the participants should then be used as a guide when planning and adapting the activities to be as inclusive as possible for all participants, as well as for searching the most appropriate transportation and accommodation for your target group.

- **Organize an Advance Planning Visit (APV):** In connection to that, it is also highly advised to organize an Advance Planning Visit (APV) before the implementation of the project, which allows the project partners to check if the location, accommodation, space, utilities, and the materials planned to be used, correspond with the selected group of participants, while it also gives the project partners time to finish the designing of the project program together. The APV is especially important when we are expecting young people with different types of physical impairment, so that their profiles and needs can be discussed in more detail and appropriate adaptations to the location can be made for them even before their arrival.
If you are the project organizer do not forget the importance of a good Infopack, where you inform your future participant of the project's program, location, obligations within the activities, important items and documentation to bring with them, emergency contacts, etc.
- **Traveling and transport:**
If you include young people with mobility impairments in your project, it is very important to check the availability of public transport. If it is not accessible or does not exist, you should provide accessible and adapted transportation for the participants that need it. Here, you should pay attention to whether the participant(s) can transfer to another seat, if their aid can be folded etc., and based on all the information you arrange suitable transportation.
When traveling by plane, you should advise wheelchair user participants to ask for airport assistance for disabled persons and to buy a plane ticket through travel agencies that have access to the more specific airline information and contacts.
- **Accommodation:**
For individuals with physical impairment accommodation must be accessible and adapted for people who have difficulties moving around and use different aids for movement (crutches, walker, electric or manual wheelchair...). The rooms must be big enough for them to move around in them with their aids, with sufficiently wide doors, must have adapted sanitary facilities and adapted bathrooms (adequate door width, handles, accessible bathtub or shower cabin...). There must be appropriate ramps or elevators, suitable floors (e.g. without carpets), materials must be placed at an appropriate height, the appropriate height of the tables is also important, as well as the appropriate size of the common areas.
- **Nutrition and serving food:**
Always check for participants' dietary requirement, allergies, etc. beforehand and prepare everything accordingly, as much as possible!
Snacks and drinks at coffee breaks and meals should be served at a low enough level that the participants who are wheelchair users can serve themselves. The food should be placed in the room in such a way that there is enough space around the tables for movement with a wheelchair or some other aid.

- **Additional help and assistance:**

It is recommended that you start thinking about having sufficient support staff for the participants, already in the preparation phase of the project activity.

It is advised that when we have individuals with physical impairment included, we plan for at least one personal assistant (preferably 2) per national group of participants present at the project activity.

A mutual agreement between disabled participants and their assistants is necessary, in terms of when the participants can manage on their own and when they specified to need assistance.

The number of assistants present per individual activity depends on the number and needs (independence) of the participants.

Being well acquainted with your expected group of participants and their needs beforehand is very important so that you can appropriately calculate the project's budget and additional costs for inclusion support for people with disabilities and extra costs for adaptive transportation, accessible accommodation, etc. The overall budget must be planned with care and precision, to avoid any complication during the implementation of project activities and to be able to provide the maximum level of well-being for your project participants.

3.3.2. Suggested materials and need-oriented tools

To create an inclusive and accessible learning environment for participants with physical impairments it is essential to adapt both physical and digital materials to meet their specific needs. Below are some recommendations, based on effective practices during “*The Big Thing*” trainings:

- **If possible, use light objects, easy to move around:** When working with individuals with physical impairment, you might need to move objects around frequently in order to adjust the space properly for each activity. Therefore, we advise the use of light, movable objects, such as tables on wheels, portable circle centre and light chairs.
- **Usage of portable wheelchair ramps:** If needed, check where you could buy or rent portable wheelchair ramps. They can help a wheelchair user to overcome a small number of steps or a small threshold and make an otherwise inaccessible space, accessible. But be careful with the inclination and width of the ramp – it mustn't be too steep or too narrow.
- **Use larger and soft objects:** When physically impaired individuals pass or throw objects to each other during an activity, they may unintentionally drop them or throw them too hard, therefore it is important that these objects are unbreakable and soft, so they cannot cause injury. If they are slightly larger, they are also less likely to slip out of hand.
- **Use more materials that require gross motor skills and fewer that require fine motor skills:** Many physically impaired individuals have difficulties performing precise movements or using materials that require fine motoric control, such as small post-its, cubicles or pins – using such materials requires extra energy and may cause

fatigue. Instead, use larger items that are easier to grip and control, such as markers, flipcharts, and painter's tape.

- **Place materials at a reachable height:** Especially when working with wheelchair users, it is important that materials are placed at a height that is accessible to both hands and eyes. Standard height tables are usually the best choice for placing materials on and adjustable height white boards or portable flipcharts are the best for writing
- **Use of digital tools and digital platforms for active participation and sharing materials:** Due to mobility limitations, some physically impaired individuals might prefer to use digital devices during an activity, as it allows them to participate more actively and contribute quicker. Enable this for them, by allowing sharing, modifying and downloading materials through digital platforms, such as Google Suite.
- **Allow assisted participation in activities:** Some physically impaired individuals might need additional support in carrying out an activity, in the form of personal assistance. Allow this support as it will enable the individual to participate fully within their abilities, without becoming frustrated or too tired. Also, calculate more time for the completion of activities that require physical effort.

3.3.3 Recommendations when working with human resources for this specific group

Accompanying persons accompany participants with disabilities in a mobility activity in order to ensure their safety, provide support and assistance, as well as assist with the participant's effective learning during the mobility experience. In the project application phase organizations have the right to claim costs related to the accompanying persons under the inclusion costs in their budget, providing the appropriate documentation as evidence that there is a need for these persons during the project activity. It is advised to plan for at least one personal assistant (preferably 2) per national group of participants present at the project activity from the application phase onward.

When it comes to individuals with physical impairments, their personal assistants can play a crucial role in ensuring that these individuals can fully participate in the project's activities, as well in navigating environmental challenges with confidence. But the amount of time the presence of a personal assistant is needed is different for each physically impaired individual – some need personal assistance with them 24/7 for personal hygiene, feeding, changing body positions etc., while others may need personal assistance just with specific activities, like handling project materials or navigating dynamic group settings for example.

This is why it is very important that the roles and the responsibilities of a personal assistant are agreed on in advance: Is the assistant going to be assisting full time? Will they be partly assisting and partly a participant in the activities? Will they only be present when needed? When possible, it is advised to include personal assistants in the preparatory meetings: this will allow them to familiarize themselves with the program and its activities in advance, thus enabling them to anticipate when and how their presence is going to be needed

Because the need for personal assistance can vary from one individual to another individual and from activity to activity, it is very important that you as the organizer, together with the facilitators and trainers, are aware and stay flexible regarding the number of people present at each activity, which may vary.

Because the project process is changing and evolving constantly, regular reflection sessions with all involved parties are highly advised.

It is beneficial if the physically impaired individual and their personal assistant already know each other and have been working together before entering a project process: that brings a certain amount of ease and flexibility to the process, from both sides

Whatever their role, always treat assistants as part of the team and try to include them in the process as much as possible but remember: in inclusive projects, we strive to organize activities in such a way that participants can be as independent as possible!

3.3.4 How to address individual inclusion needs in this specific group

As an organizer it is important for you to know that when it comes to physically impaired individuals, they vary a lot in their abilities, specific needs and preferences, as already mentioned above.

- **Individual online or in-person meetings with them in project preparation phase:** this will enable you to get to know each member of the group, their needs and preferences, thus you can anticipate a certain group dynamic and project activity flow.
- **Provide wheelchair adapted transportation and accessible accommodation at the project location:** When you have wheelchair users it is important to check with them what type of wheelchair they have and to organize appropriate wheelchair adapted transportation and wheelchair adapted accommodation with sufficiently wide doors, adapted sanitary facilities and adapted bathrooms (adequate door width, handles, accessible bathtub or shower cabin...), and equipped with appropriate ramps or elevators, suitable floors (that there are no carpets, for example). Be sure to plan for extra costs for adaptive transportation and accessible accommodation in advance.
- **Especially when you have wheelchair users within the group it is important to ensure a project activities space and materials appropriate for them to use during the process.** The space has to be big enough for everybody to be able to move around, with no stairs or equipped with big enough elevators, close to the accessible toilets. If needed, portable wheelchair ramps are useful for overcoming small steps and thresholds. Use chairs and tables that are easy to move around. The materials should be soft and of the appropriate size, so that they are easy to hold and to pass around, without acquiring too much fine motor skills. They have must be placed at a reachable height when sitting.
- **Calculate an appropriate length of the working day and breaks when planning a project activity:** Depending on their abilities, the number of accessible toilets and the number of elevators, physically impaired individuals might need longer break times to take care of their needs. It is the organizer and the facilitators' job to take this into account and to incorporate it within a working day time. This is why having an APV before the project activity implementation is advised so that the all involved parties can plan an appropriate program and schedule together.
- **Be open to the presence of personal assistant(s) during a project activity:** As already mentioned, depending on their abilities, some physically impaired individuals might need personal assistant(s) with them to be able to participate within an activity. As an organizer, embrace that, and adapt accordingly. Be sure to plan for extra costs for accompanying persons in advance.

- **Provide access to digital devices and digital platforms during project activity:** Depending on their abilities, some physically impaired individuals might prefer to use digital devices for writing, sharing and modifying materials, as it allows them to contribute quicker. As an organizer be open to that and make sure to provide appropriate platforms and materials.
- **Be observant of participants' needs and ensure enough time for regular reflections:** When it comes to people with physical impairment, their physical capacities and level of tiredness can vary from day to day, or from session to session. This is why it is important to be observant of their needs and preferences at any given moment and adapt accordingly. In connection to that, it is also very important to ensure regular reflection time, where you can check on the well-being of your participants and adjust the project process if needed.
- **Calculate the project budget with precision and care:** When it comes to participants with physical impairment the organizations and project organizers have the right to request for additional costs for inclusion support for participants with disabilities and extra costs for adaptive transportation, accessible accommodation and other relevant expenses. Be sure to plan the overall budget carefully and precisely, to avoid any complication during the implementation of project activities and to be able to provide maximum level of well-being of your project participants.
- **Stay open-minded and try not to assume:** As an organizer, try to create a space for open communication with all involved parties in your project. Have an open discussion about their abilities and if something is unclear, it is ok to ask. Do not automatically assume that they need support with something and if they decline support, respect their choice.

4. Useful tips when collaborating with trainers with disabilities

Bringing a trainer with a disability into your team can add real depth and authenticity to courses on inclusion and accessibility, and serve as an added value in any type of course that intersects with different life experiences and their approach to the topic. Lived experience often resonates more strongly with participants and helps connect abstract concepts to real-life situations. When a trainer shares similar access challenges with participants, they can bring practical insight into what truly works in inclusive settings. Additionally, trainers with disabilities might be better equipped to understand the requirements and adapted solutions to put into practice when it comes to participants with the same disability.

However, it's important not to make assumptions. Not all trainers with disabilities will automatically be prepared to address a wide range of access needs or manage a diverse group. Lived experience is valuable, but it doesn't replace good planning, preparation, and support.

Early Planning and Team Coordination

Where possible, organize an in-person or online meeting with the full team well before the training begins. This allows everyone to get to know each other's working preferences, identify any specific support needs, and agree on how the training will run. It is equally important to check in regularly during the course itself, so the team can reflect on what is working, make adjustments where needed, and ensure that everyone is comfortable with their roles.

Task-sharing should be done with respect and openness: check if the trainer would like support with certain parts of the process, but do not assume they need it. And if they prefer to manage independently, that choice should be respected.

If a personal assistant is part of the arrangement, it is important to plan this support together in advance. Trainers with physical disabilities, for instance, may need help setting up the room, handing out materials, organizing coffee breaks, or tidying up after sessions. In the case of visually impaired trainers, having an extra person to pick up the visual cues and the sentiment around the room can be really useful to increase the trainer's ability to create a comfortable environment for all participants and to ease the connection with participants, avoiding misunderstanding and inconveniences. These are practical but essential contributions to a smooth and inclusive experience.

Venue and Environment

The training space should be accessible to all team members. This includes things like wide doors, step-free access, lifts where needed, and accessible toilets. It's also helpful to give trainers with mobility or visual impairments early access to the venue, so they can get familiar with the layout, lighting, acoustics, and any potential obstacles.

When there are multiple access needs in the room — for example, a trainer with a visual impairment working with Deaf participants — additional preparation may be needed. Interpretation alone may not be enough to manage group dynamics or read the room effectively. In these cases, a personal assistant might quietly describe non-verbal cues or changes in energy to help the trainer stay connected with the group.

It's also essential that trainers receive a clear briefing about participants' access needs ahead of time. Ideally, someone in the team should take on the role of an accessibility focal point, ensuring that accommodations are followed through and adjustments made where necessary.

Working in Tandem

A well-matched co-trainer can make a real difference. For example, a trainer with a visual impairment might pair well with someone who's confident working with visual materials or managing spatial elements of the session. Complementary skills help ensure that the session runs smoothly and that different learning styles are supported.

Finally, the whole team — trainers, assistants, co-trainers — should take time to clarify:

- Who is doing what - to avoid overlaps and interruptions;
- What specific access needs exist, and therefore how methods might need to be adjusted;
- What the plan is if things shift during the training.

Clear, respectful communication - before and during the course - helps avoid confusion and creates a more stable, inclusive environment for everyone involved.

A short summary for organizers and institutions working with diverse ability participants

- Familiarize yourself well with the principles of inclusive projects
- Decide which diverse groups of participants you would like to work with and familiarize yourself with their characteristics
- Calculate your project's budget with precision and care, with sufficient inclusion support costs foreseen
- Dedicate enough time to logistical preparations
- Plan for sufficient staff and accompanying persons to support you and your participants during project implementation
- Work on complementary skills and methodologies for mixed audiences
- Discuss in advance accessibility needs and adapted methodologies
- Dedicate time to get to know together participants and the event environment together
- Be aware of the surroundings during the training sessions to prevent unnecessary disruptions.

5. Conclusions

One main message stands out in this guide: inclusion does not happen by chance. It requires careful planning and adaptable tools selected through an understanding of multiple needs, coupled with a deep respect for the individual experiences and needs of each participant. In this context, it is increasingly important to have a wide range of methodologies and resources available to people with disabilities.

Disability is not a unique experience, and there is no universal solution. Often, training methods, materials, or communication styles that work well for one person may represent barriers for another. This is why a variety of tools, such as tactile objects, digital platforms, sensory-friendly materials, or adapted teamwork or space utilization strategies, are essential. Without them, even the best activities, with the best intentions, run the risk of excluding precisely those they are intended to engage.

On the other hand, inclusive tools tend to benefit a broad group of users, not just the target group for which they were designed. Clearer instructions, multiple ways to interact with the content, ample space and time for reflection, or accessible formats often enhance the learning experience for all. When we base our projects on inclusive design principles, we not only address individual needs, but we enhance the richness of the learning environment and move closer to universal design.

The lack of tools reinforces inequalities and this extends beyond project activities and training. It can limit access to employment, civic participation and personal development. This guide seeks to address this gap, offering practical advice for institutions working with people with diverse abilities and also encouraging a shift in thinking towards inclusion and universal design in learning environments.

In short, this guide is a testament to the idea that effective planning of projects and training facilitation requires a deep understanding and attention to the multiple needs of each participant. Adapting environments, activities, methodologies and materials is not a matter of regulatory compliance; it is critical to creating meaningful and successful learning experiences. This applies to institutions, trainers, facilitators and educators, as well as social entities and public institutions that design and deliver these programs.

The final conclusion is a call to action: a commitment to build more inclusive environments in all areas of youth work and non-formal education.

This requires a shift in perspective towards recognizing the value of the active participation of people with disabilities in the design and implementation of learning activities, especially in non-formal education contexts.

By empowering people with diverse abilities to participate and lead, we can create a more equitable and enriching society for all. Institutions play a vital role in promoting this participation, ensuring that inclusion is a fundamental principle embedded in every stage of their work.

Inclusion is not about doing more for some, but about doing better for all.

6. Testimonials



“Cooperation in TBT as the trainer and the host of the learning process was a big and dynamic learning process for me as well.

Where most learning happened for me was thinking about many possibilities especially during preparation. At first, because I was still getting familiar with participants – them being diverse groups in many aspects. And then because of the participation, as participatory approach is the key value. I needed to think about it from the perspective of diverse experience of participants, diverse familiarity of non-formal approach in trainings, diverse capacity in movement, diverse wishes as in what they wanted, etc.

Knowing that we learn with the whole body, the big question for me was: How can they still move their body, use the ability of the body even if they feel it only partly. I spoke more with them as I usually do with participants, and we were adapting while going through the process. Another big present I received was a flexibility even beyond what I was used to until then. I needed to learn that space influences the time of wheelchair users, especially when there is a limited number of elevators, narrow corridors, number of toilets, rain on the road, etc. And that influenced our time for sessions. Hence, many adaptations and creativity with methods and approaches, more than usually. Which was awesome for me as a trainer – how to stay calm, still focus on the participants and at the same time keep focus on our aims.

I’m grateful for our collective journey, their trust and the roads it opened for everybody.”

Alenka Oblak – a Slovenian trainer and organizer of the Slovenian national TBT trainings

“With *The Big Thing* we tried to change the paradigm of training and of inclusion. It is a pending task in the field of youth to include everyone, also as trainers.”

Virginia Hernández – a Spanish trainer and organizer of the Spanish national TBT training and the international ones.



“Balancing individual and group needs has been a challenge but I think is the key for this kind of training courses. The group itself was a big resource.

The most “Wow moment” happened during a conversation where participants have been asking for tricks and tips for the future. They would like to continue with this path and to me the main aim has been reached but also when participants themselves offered to cofacilitate sessions and were so eager to go out of their comfort zone.

Giulia Pagoni - Belgian trainer and organizer of the Belgium national TBT training.

7. Resources

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