Theory of Creativity podcast

Season 2, Episode 3: Achievable Accessibility with Morwenna Collett

In this episode, you’ll hear Patternmakers Founder Tandi Palmer Williams interview Morwenna Collett an accomplished Sydney based consultant, leader and facilitator working in the arts.

Tandi Palmer Williams (00:03):

Welcome to Theory of Creativity, where we discuss the tools, techniques, and ideas for growing arts, culture, and creativity in our world. My name is Tandi Palmer Williams, and I'm Founder and Managing Director of a research agency called Patternmakers. In this series, I join with colleagues from theatre, dance, music, visual arts, literature, and heritage to speak with experts in research, business, economics, technology, and policy. We talk about the challenges facing arts and cultural organisations today, like engaging audiences, securing funding, and creating positive impacts through our work. I want to help grow your organisation bigger, better, and stronger, so that, collectively, we can do even more good in the world.

Tandi Palmer Williams (00:49):

In today's episode I speak to Morwenna Collett, a dear friend and long-time colleague who's an arts consultant specialising in diversity, access, and inclusion. Morwenna believes that everyone should have equal opportunities to access and participate in the arts, and that the arts and cultural sector should reflect and represent our diverse society. Values I'm sure many of you share. I think you'll find Morwenna’s take on these topics really engaging and, dare I say it, accessible. And I really love that her consulting work is grounded in research and evaluation. So in 2019, she actually completed a Churchill Fellowship investigating inclusive music programmes, venues, and festivals, which actively engaged disabled people and she visited the UK, USA, and Ireland as part of her research. I'm really pumped to get into some of her findings today, and hear her advice on making meaningful progress in relation to access, diversity and inclusion.

Tandi Palmer Williams (01:48):

Today's episode is part of a new season of Theory of Creativity supported by Creative Victoria, centred around the idea of real change and renewal. We're exploring the tools, techniques, and ideas we can harness to build a newly thriving arts and culture sector post-pandemic - and even herald in the next renaissance. Stick around after the interview for my top takeaways from the discussion, and to hear about this month's most clicked research news item. Now, without further ado, here's my interview with Morwenna Collett. All right, welcome to the podcast, Morwenna.

Morwenna Collett (02:21):

Hello, Tandi, thank you so much for having me. Huge fan of the podcast. Great to be here.

Tandi Palmer Williams (02:25):

Well, it's a conversation I've been looking forward to for a long time. You're doing such important good work in the access and inclusion space, and I'm really excited to talk about some of what you've been getting up to. But for those who are listening, I want to, I guess, share a little bit of background because we first met working at the Australia Council around 2010, I think it was, and you were working in the music… - what was it called at that point?

Morwenna Collett (02:52):

Oh, back with the music board, back in those days.

Tandi Palmer Williams (02:54):

And I was working in the research team. But five years later, we collaborated in, I think, 2015 in a consulting capacity on an impact evaluation of the Unlimited Commission's programme in the UK. And it was such a highlight experience - for both of us, I think - but from my perspective because not only were we doing field work at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival -

Morwenna Collett (03:17):

The dream.

Tandi Palmer Williams (03:18):

Seeing some amazing shows in between interviews and doing observations and all sorts of fun stuff - seeing some great, great shows featuring disabled artists - but the evaluation was actually asking a really brave question, wasn't it? I think the question was, is the programme, the Unlimited Commission's programme, making a difference in terms of perceptions of people with a disability. And I felt all credit to the executive producer, Jo Verrent, for being so brave to ask that question of a programme that she was leading, but it was quite - being involved in evaluating the evidence against such a big question was fascinating, wasn't it? And we learned so much through that project, didn't we?

Morwenna Collett (04:02):

We did. I mean, Unlimited Commission's programme is a multi-million-pound investment in the creativity of disabled artists that came out of the London 2012 Paralympics and investment around that. And yeah, it's around “can art shift people's perceptions in society?” and certainly well on its way and that particular organisation Unlimited is now going out on its own and has become its own unique beast in organisation and continuing to fund great, exciting work, some of which I think is the best quality of work by artists anywhere in the world.

Tandi Palmer Williams (04:35):

I love it. One interviewee called it the last avant-garde, didn't they? That's what people were talking about, that some of the work is so artistically ground breaking that it's thought of as, yeah, the last avant-garde. It's quite a crazy concept. But look, I'm so happy to have you on the podcast today. You're now an arts consultant specialising in diversity, access, and inclusion. And for those listening will you take us back through some of your past history and how you came to this particular role and a little bit of what's happened along the way?

Morwenna Collett (05:06):

So, I actually started off life as a classical musician. I studied flute at the Queensland Conservatorium of Music. And my plan was to become an orchestral flute player in one of Australia's few orchestras. I had an interesting experience at the end of my first year of uni, where I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. And it was really an interesting time in that, obviously, I was learning to navigate disability for the first time in my life, and seeing that the university wasn't really ready or equipped to deal with my new access requirements. And also, the classical music industry was really not a particularly accessible place to work at that time. And I suppose that experience really opened my eyes up to the barriers that artists with disability can experience in our arts sector here in Australia. And it led me down the path of pursuing arts management rather than performance, which, in hindsight, was probably a good idea anyway, for multiple reasons.

Morwenna Collett (06:04):

But I've had a long history working at funding agencies, quite a while at the Australia Council. I've run a peak body based here in Sydney called Accessible Arts that is our state peak body for artists with disability. And after doing a Churchill fellowship in 2019 went, "Right, I think I've got to do this consulting thing because there seems to be a real need for organisations to have someone they can work with to help create positive change around diversity, access, and inclusion." And I felt like I was someone that had lived experience and also had the skills to be able to come in and play a “critical friend” role to help make change happen in organisations.

Tandi Palmer Williams (06:45):

I love that phrase, critical friend. And I think from the sidelines, I've been cheering this development in your career because I think you have so much to give. And I think you're widely respected as someone with not only very detailed knowledge of the subjects that we're going to talk about today, and lived experience, but you have incredible work ethic, and a really collaborative style and approach. I'm pleased to say I call you one of my dearest friends along with important associate and collaborator at Patternmakers. So, congratulations on this new line of work, and I'm so excited to hear about some of what you have found in your Churchill fellowship, and the consulting work that you're doing. Let's talk about that now. I mean, you call yourself an arts consultant specialising in diversity, access, and inclusion, and we hear these words all the time, but can you just in your own words reflect on what they mean, and what's the difference between access, inclusion and diversity?

Morwenna Collett (07:54):

And they are words that are getting bandied about, I think more and more. They're words that I think particularly funding bodies are becoming more and more interested in. There's a lot more requirements around being diverse and being inclusive. And it's not always clear exactly what that means. I think for me, there's an old phrase that says diversity is being invited to the party, and inclusion is being asked to dance. So, diversity is around this idea of representation and having people represented and then inclusion is really about having people involved and engaged in a really holistic way. And then I think the access or the accessibility lens on top of that is really a little bit more technical in that it's about how do we remove some of the barriers that exist for different people in our society? So, if we're working with people who are deaf, accessibility is around providing an Auslan interpreter, a captioner, that kind of thing.

Morwenna Collett (08:50):

I think, yeah, diversity inclusion here in Australia, as I said, can mean lots of different things. And we don't really have a great definition of what we mean by those terms. And there's a whole lot of different underrepresented groups out there. But it's not clear necessarily who or which groups we might be talking about. Sometimes, as you're well aware, I get a little bit obsessed with the UK and looking further afield. And in the UK, they have something called The Equalities Act, and they tend to use the phrase “equality, diversity, and inclusion.” And in that act, it really steps out nine different protected characteristic areas, which I think are really interesting to have that that laid out for us. But here, because we don't have that, I think organisations have a choice and they can choose which areas that they want to focus on at a particular time. Not necessarily jump into all of them all at once, but make some considered choices around which areas to focus on right now.

Tandi Palmer Williams (09:53):

I know that you've had a deep interest particularly in access in terms of the music sector, haven't you? I notice that one of the ideas you talk about is that music hasn't made as much progress as some other art forms. Why is that? And why have you been focusing on music in some of your work lately as a particular sector of need?

Morwenna Collett (10:18):

I think music, from what I found, is a little bit behind the curve in terms of having conversations about access and inclusion. I think it's been on the agenda for other art forms like dance and theatre for a longer period of time. And there's a whole raft of different reasons as to why that could be. Is it around music being a listening art form, and we're not always seeing artists and not that every disability is physical and able to be seen? But also, I guess, the music industry has been grappling with all sorts of issues over the years. Right now, around survival, particularly for live music venues. And perhaps access and inclusion just hasn't been as high priority in that particular artform area. And as that being my own area of arts practise, it's something I'm really passionate about seeing how we can bring the music industry up to speed with getting on board around access, inclusion, and all the opportunities that that can provide and open up for them.

Tandi Palmer Williams (11:13):

So, let's talk a little bit about, I guess, some of the reasons why an organisation - and whether it's a live music venue, or a performing arts centre, or something else all together - but why would an organisation pursue this area? What are the imperatives for change or the reasons that might exist?

Morwenna Collett (11:37):

So, I think, from the conversations that I've had, I think it tends to be four main reasons why arts organisations are interested in diversity, access, and inclusion. Usually, the moral imperative is one that comes up. So, because it feels like the right thing to do. At a societal level, I think general population thinks that being inclusive and being welcoming for everyone is important. I think, being really realistic, funding and legislation is another really key driver around organisations doing this work.

Morwenna Collett (12:10):

Certainly in the UK, Arts Council England has some really stringent funding requirements around organisations who receive multiyear funding needing to have quality diversity and inclusion plans and hard targets behind those plans that they have to meet to stay in receipt of that funding. Legislation, of course, is another really interesting area. It's probably used more perhaps in places like the US than it is in Australia. But we do have here, very much a complaints-based legislation. We've got the Australian Human Rights Commission where people can make complaints around discrimination under those different diversity areas, too. So I think funding and legislation is another really key area why organisations want to get this right.

Morwenna Collett (12:55):

But for me, the two more exciting reasons, I guess, if you like, are artistic potential. For me, I guess one of the reasons that I fell into doing this work is that I genuinely believe that artists with disability are making some of the most exciting, ground breaking, risk taking, experimental, interesting work out there. And if you're not capitalising on the opportunities that artists with disability provide then I think you're really missing out at an artistic level.

Tandi Palmer Williams (13:24):

Can we talk about some examples of amazing artistic work that exemplifies that creative case?

Morwenna Collett (13:31):

Absolutely. Oh, my goodness. So many. I think if I can think back to one of my transformative artistic experiences in this field, I would go back to that Unlimited Festival in the UK, which celebrates the work of disabled artists at the Southbank Centre in London. And I still remember the first time I saw a work by disabled Scottish dancer, Claire Cunningham, the work was called Guide Gods. And it was a dance piece, looking specifically at the relationship between disability and religion and how disability is viewed in different types of religious areas or sex.

Morwenna Collett (14:11):

One of the reasons I love the show is that it used what you call embedded access or aesthetic access, so it used access - and that being audio description, captioning, and British Sign Language in this example - in a creative way. So, it didn't just have the sign language interpreter over on the side, but the sign language interpreter was part of the show. It was all inbuilt and embedded into the work. So, that's one example, but there are so many.

Tandi Palmer Williams (14:41):

I found it really powerful seeing work of Jess Thom, and she was interviewed as part of that evaluation we were doing and her work. She's best known for this work, Touretteshero, which is kind of an alter ego of hers and a project aimed at increasing awareness of Tourette syndrome, which is a neurological condition where people have a verbal or a physical tick. And the performance really embraces that condition, and it's both very moving, powerful, and funny. Yeah, her work and her book that she wrote as well was really... Helped me understand, I guess a lot. Yeah, build my understanding of the different access issues and identity issues that come up in this area, which is so incredibly important and fascinating.

Morwenna Collett (15:29):

And I think art really does have a role to play in breaking down some of those barriers and stereotypes that we all have as to what our perception might be of how people with disability might live their lives. And yeah, I think Jess does that in such a beautifully nuanced, hilarious way through her work. And she's a real advocate and activist, as well as an incredible artist. So it's a great combo.

Tandi Palmer Williams (15:53):

And so many more we could mention, but let's talk about that fourth rationale you were coming to, which is the business case.

Morwenna Collett (15:58):

Yeah. So, I think this is not something that we're talking about enough here in Australia yet. But I think that the real economic impact, and the real economic benefit to being inclusive is so important. As we return post COVID, we want to be able to have as many people interacting with our work as possible, and quite frankly selling as many tickets as possible now that we're back to 100%.

Tandi Palmer Williams (16:23):

Damn right.

Morwenna Collett (16:24):

And in the UK, again, they talk about something called the Purple Pound, which is the spending power of disabled households. And the last time this was measured, a couple of years back, it was estimated to be about 250 billion pounds a year to UK businesses. So, in Australia, one in five of us live with disabilities. So, if you're not being accessible or inclusive, there's a huge part of the market that's not able to engage with you, that you can't sell tickets to.

Tandi Palmer Williams (16:52):

Yeah, and I was fascinated to read, I think you put it beautifully in a recent article you wrote for Limelight Magazine, but that people with a disability over-represent in terms of arts participation. They're a group that on average are more likely to donate to arts and culture causes. They're more likely to participate creatively or have a creative practise themselves. So they're a particularly important group not only for moral reasons, but for economic reasons. So let's talk a little bit about, I guess, how you make headway in this space. What are some of the things that organisations can do? And what are some of the things that you get asked to do and that you now offer?

Morwenna Collett (17:39):

For me, a lot of the work that I do is coming to an organisation and helping them develop a plan, a policy, or a strategy about how they might tackle either multiple diversity areas or a particular diversity area. So it might be something like a disability action plan, it might be having an organization's first diversity and inclusion policy. A lot of what I do is around research, looking at what other organisations who are similar are doing in this space. It's a lot around consultation, so talking with people in an organisation, talking with external stakeholders, particularly those with lived experience, of course, and producing, hopefully, something that's going to be a really realistic and achievable roadmap to how to make change in an area.

Morwenna Collett (18:23):

I think one of the frustrations with this work is that change can feel slow at times. So I'm a real advocate for having a multiyear plan because while there are certainly low hanging fruit and quick fixes to find, a lot of it does take planning and might take several years to come to fruition, particularly if you're looking at things like capital works around access improvements, and those kinds of things. So a lot of planning and then a lot of facilitation of conversations or training as well. So training around, obviously, what diversity, and inclusion, and disability, and access is - unconscious bias, the attitudinal barriers that we in society unknowingly have and can put in place.

Morwenna Collett (19:06):

I think some of the barriers that are - when we think barriers, the term “barriers,” I guess, really refers to the social model of disability, which is around - the old medical way of looking at disability was around someone having a particular impairment that needed to be fixed or cured, and that the responsibility for disability, the onus was really on an individual and the social model of disability places disability as a societal issue, and it's around the environment that disables certain people from being able to access and participate in everyday things.

Morwenna Collett (19:41):

So, some of those different barriers that can be disabling can be, of course, physical barriers, which are the first ones that we think of, but also communication barriers, which I'm sure we'll talk about. Social barriers are another big one, around people's upbringing and backgrounds that they might have. Transport barriers are another huge one. And I think if you're an arts venue, making sure that you have information around accessible public transport on your website is really important. And then of course, attitudinal barriers. So how welcoming are you? What language are you using? What format is your information in is another really important thing.

Tandi Palmer Williams (20:20):

Yeah, I'm reminded about some of the ways that we thought about access in relation to a research and evaluation methodology when we work together. And starting really with a commitment to do our best to always consider and reflect on “Are we being accessible?” To ask the questions, right. It often just starts with asking people, do you have access needs, and how can we help to meet them?

Morwenna Collett (20:50):

That's right. And that should be a standard question. Do you have access requirements on any event you might be running? Anytime you have the ability to ask that question. It's much easier to answer a question if you've been asked that question, rather than a person with disability having to specifically contact you to check if you're able to meet their access requirements.

Tandi Palmer Williams (21:11):

So you work on things like strategies, plans, policies, disability action plans and roadmaps. You also do access audits, am I right? That kind of thing. What's involved in an access audit?

Morwenna Collett (21:24):

So, yes, I'm also an access consultant, is the term that we use, and that I guess is looking at a space or a venue and looking at some of the things around our access to premises standards for our buildings code, the Disability Discrimination Act. So, access audits tend to be a lot of the kind of ramps and toilets side of things. So, measuring ramp gradients and toilet bowl heights are really important as well. So, yeah, access audits are really about going into a space and identifying where changes might need to occur to meet building code, essentially.

Tandi Palmer Williams (22:01):

And now, in a way, our websites are the front line for engagement with audiences, aren't they? And accessibility of websites is-

Morwenna Collett (22:12):

It's the first step, right? It's like, yeah, I'm doing a project with Music New South Wales at the moment looking at live music venues. And the first thing that we're doing is actually conducting a digital audit, so not physically going there. But having a look at, as a person with disability, what does your website tell me about the access that you do or don't provide? So having a page on your website about access, or having access as a searchable function within your website is really important. And there's lots of different pieces of information that you can put on there. But having something. If you don't have anything, people will just go, "You probably don't have anything, I won't bother with..." It's an extra effort to have to ring up or email and find out. So being really clear about access on your website is a great first step.

Morwenna Collett (22:56):

I think, as you say, obviously, so much of our life is online now. Something the disability community is really thinking about at the moment is the leaps and bounds that we did make in terms of access last year, in terms of people being able to participate in things remotely. There was a great interview I heard last year with an artist Ricky Buchanan, who's bedridden or house-bound artist who talked about the fact that last year her world really opened up with being able to subscribe to the Melbourne Digital Concert Hall, for example. I think one of the things we're conscious of as a community, a disability community, now is that we don't want to lose those access gains that we actually had during the pandemic. So while we return to things in-person, we also want to make sure that live streaming remains available, that live streaming services are accessible. Do they have captioning? Do they have Auslan? Do they have audio description? So, yeah, as we all start to think about what coming back physically looks like we're hoping not to lose our digital accessibility gains from last year as well.

Tandi Palmer Williams (24:02):

Yeah, we know from our work with the Audience Outlook Monitor that people who experience or live with a disability have been more likely to participate in digital programmes and more likely to say that they plan to continue post pandemic, but they're joined by people, for instance, people who live in a regional or remote area have also been more likely to engage in some activities, and people with caring responsibilities, whether that's caring for parents or children or whatever it might be, who might be sticking to home for whatever reason. They're also more likely to want to continue to participate online.

Tandi Palmer Williams (24:42):

So, it's definitely something we need to think about as being part of how we work long term. Obviously, it's going to look different for everyone depending on your particular function and capacity, all of that kind of thing. But I'm reminded of that concept that you talk about sometimes, universal design. We make changes in some areas that are designed to benefit a certain group and find that actually they benefit everyone in some ways. A little thing that I picked up on through working together with you was having our reports in size 12 font. It's just-

Morwenna Collett (25:20):

Good woman.

Tandi Palmer Williams (25:20):

The tiniest little thing. It's not just people with vision impairments that struggle sometimes to read, have difficulty with legibility or font size, lots of people do. And I find even myself, I do have very strong glasses, but lots of people have said, "When the font is larger, it's so much easier to read," and that's such a small change that can have such a big benefit in terms of people engaging with our work. So, thank you so much for that small tip. Is there anything else about universal design that you think is interesting? How would a concept like universal design relate to our work in arts or culture, do you think?

Morwenna Collett (26:03):

Yeah, it's such an important topic, I think, in that, it's really about when you're designing something whether it's a venue, whether it's a programme, whether it's a set of guidelines. It's around thinking about designing from the outside for everybody, which is obviously, of course, a much better thing to do, rather than trying to retrofit access on at the end, which I think sometimes in the arts we're in a habit of doing. So yeah, it's just about trying to think really broadly and inclusively about who is the audience that you're designing something for, and then building something that's going to work for everyone.

Morwenna Collett (26:35):

I think, Tandi, great to talk about size 12 font, but some other little things that I like to suggest are around just having something around access in as many of your templates across an organisation as possible. So in your budget template, they should absolutely be aligned for access. In project planning templates, another great place, and just having that prompt by having something in a template that will make you stop and think, “what's the access and inclusion lens that I need to put on this project or in this budget that I'm doing?” So that's another really good one, and on the font size one, too, another classic arts organisation trap is having our reports up on websites in PDF form. So, anytime we've got a PDF, we should also make sure we've got an accessible version of a document, too, because quite often PDFs, unless they've been set up in a particular way can't be read by anyone who uses a screen reader, for example. So, if you have a PDF up, also have an accompanying Word document, or another accessible format as well.

Tandi Palmer Williams (27:38):

As we're talking, I'm just thinking of all the things we could do better at. Things like data being buried in PDFs, or even difficult files like Excel files and stuff and we can do so much more to bring out the insights and even presenting them. If it's not a Word doc on a web page so people with a screen reader don't have to open a file to find the insight - they can read about it on the web page. What are some other examples that we can do online?

Morwenna Collett (28:11):

Another great area to think about is social media. Because of course, we're all engaging with that more and more and more. And a couple of quick tips to think about there are: social media does tend to be very image heavy. So making sure that we have both image descriptions and alternative text behind any imagery that we use online. So alternative text or alt text is in the backend of a website, and it will read a short description of what an image actually is out to someone who's using a screen reader.

Morwenna Collett (28:41):

Image description is a similar kind of thing, but it's actually in text that everyone sees below an image. And it's usually got slightly more detail behind it than just an alt text description. And another one is around hashtags, which of course, we're all using so much now. There's something called camel case for hashtags, which is where we capitalise the first letter of every word in a hashtag rather than having all lowercase. And the reason that we don't want to have all lowercase is, again, someone using a screen reader, the screen reader will not be able to read that out. But if you capitalise the word, a screen reader will read that out perfectly. So, there's a couple of other quick tips and tricks. I think there are some great examples of how sometimes there can be a sense of overwhelm when it comes to accessibility, thinking it's all going to be really hard and really expensive. And certainly there are so many low or no cost solutions that can make a really big difference to people being able to engage with your work.

Tandi Palmer Williams (29:39):

Yeah, I'm reminded that sometimes you think, "I need to get an expert to do this, or I need to be trained to have a go with the image description." Sometimes I hesitate to think, “is this description going to stack up? Is someone going to call me out for not doing it properly?” What's your stance on that? Just give it a go or get the experts in?

Morwenna Collett (29:59):

I think I would much rather give it a go than be fearful and be worried about doing the wrong thing, and not try at all. So, there's heaps of great information available online, lots of training that you can do, that kind of thing as well. But yeah, I'm definitely all for, give it a go, but make sure you've done some background reading, and understand as well. But with things like that, it's just literally saying what you see, and how would you communicate it to someone that doesn't have the image in front of them.

Tandi Palmer Williams (30:27):

I know with, for instance, on research projects, when we're writing surveys, some of the survey platforms will give you an accessibility score. And that's been really powerful for us. It's tempting when you're designing a survey to pack as much as you can, and you've got all of these attributes that you want to measure and those complex tabulated questions where you've got an agreement scale across the top with five different answer options from strongly disagree to strongly agree. And then down the table, you're asking people to read five, seven, ten lines, and give their scores on a matrix and stuff. And that's actually not that accessible, nor is that that engaging for anyone. So, there's been a few no-no’s like that now designing surveys. With any list to try and keep it nice and short, try and get that accessibility score, and even ask someone to review the survey. I mean, what's the role of a, picking up on that word, critical friend - if you're looking for help with something that you're working on, what can someone do? Who can they reach out to, to get that feedback in a friendly and approachable way?

Morwenna Collett (31:41):

Yeah, look, I think user testing is so important. Having people with lived experience have a look at something for you. And of course, I've only got one type of lived experience so I regularly work with other collaborators and consultants who have other types of lived experience either in disability or other diversity areas. It's really building your village and knowing who your people are around you. Asking your staff. A lot of organisations, I think, have a bit of a habit of just asking staff whether or not they have disability during the hiring process. There might be a box to take on an application form or something. And then we don't often ask staff again. And the problem with that, of course, is that disability can either be something people are born with or might acquire later in life.

Morwenna Collett (32:30):

For example, if you've worked somewhere for a really long time, and you're only asked that question right at the beginning of working somewhere you might have acquired something along the way. So looking at who you've got, the value and expertise you've got in your staff cohort, and then of course, your other stakeholders, whether that's artists or audience members. Of course, there are people like me that people can reach out to for advice. And also, in some states and territories in Australia, we also have peak arts and disability bodies, for example, Accessible Arts here in New South Wales, that I'm currently working with at the moment.

Tandi Palmer Williams (33:02):

Let's talk now about, I guess, making headway in relation to access, inclusion, and diversity. What are some of the ways someone can get started and make progress and the success factors for, on this series we're talking about real change and renewal. So what have you noticed in your research through the Churchill project you did and the work that you're doing with organisations? How does someone get started and make progress?

Morwenna Collett (33:29):

So, I've identified five key success factors, I think, for organisations who are on either doing this well, or on a path to doing this well. And the first one really is just that “getting started” piece. And for me that's around looking for achievable accessibility. So, what are the quick wins? What are the low hanging fruit? What things can you do right now, so that you've got some runs on the board with this? And again, I think it's trying to remove that fear factor and just give it a go and commit to doing something rather than just, "Oh, we'll get to that down the track."

Tandi Palmer Williams (34:02):

We've heard some good tips already on those quick wins like thinking about your template. So that's something you can go and do immediately after finishing this episode. Just go open a template and insert access line on your budget template, change the font size on your template, and feel the thrill of micro progress!

Morwenna Collett (34:21):

Absolutely, absolutely. The second success factor for me is around doing your research, doing listening and seeking feedback. So it's really looking at what information already exists around how you can make progress in this space. It's listening to the voices, people with lived experience. It's asking questions and getting feedback. So, if you've got an event and you have a post-event survey, do you have a question in there around any access that was provided and getting feedback on the quality of that so that you can make improvements next time?

Morwenna Collett (34:53):

The third success factor is around organisational culture and responsibility and the ideal is that we're working towards, hopefully, a future where access just becomes part of what we do and it's embedded across everything in our organisations. And so for me how that organisational culture can become more inclusive, it might be things like having access and inclusion on staff meeting agendas. It's around finding ways to have conversations about it more regularly. It's about having it in those templates and just embedding it to become a normalised part of what we do.

Morwenna Collett (35:28):

The fourth factor is around planning and continuous improvement. And I think for me, this one's around what we were talking about before in that you're not going to get this all done by tomorrow. And I guess one of the reasons I love working in this field is there's always more that you can do. I don't think there's anything that's ever 100% inclusive. There's always more we can do, and particularly with things like technology advancements changing all the time, there's more opportunities opening up around how we can make things inclusive. So, sometimes having things like a multiyear disability action plan can be really useful in terms of working towards tangible change in a couple of years time. And getting the budgets to align with making that happen. So, yeah, planning and improvement.

Morwenna Collett (36:13):

And then the fifth one is around connection and keeping on learning. So it's about doing some training, it's around being involved in professional development events or conferences. It's around finding like-minded organisations that are already doing work in this space that you can learn from. I think this is an area where arts organisations do tend to be incredibly collaborative and really enjoy sharing the wins that they've had in this space. It's not something that people are secret-squirreling and being competitive around. I think there's a genuine desire to want to share our successes and failures with each other so that we can all learn and become better as a sector.

Tandi Palmer Williams (36:55):

I read somewhere you say that inclusion is a journey not a destination. And it's always good to have conversations like this to learn new things, but remind ourselves of things that we have heard before, and maybe haven't yet actioned. And to always be seeking out new connections, new knowledge. I think that I'm blessed to have found you as a colleague and friend, and I've learned so much through working with you. And it's reminded me that by seeking out and developing new relationships with people of all backgrounds, it can be so enriching and life affirming, and open up new opportunities, and new consciousness about whole worlds that might seem invisible or impenetrable if you weren't involved.

Morwenna Collett (37:48):

With this area of work, it's something that you can't unlearn. Once you've had your eyes open to access and inclusion in your size 12 font, or whatever it is, you take that with you wherever you go next on your career journey and your personal life as well. I think and there's always more that we can all do, including myself, but I think it's so fantastic to work with people and see that awakening of learning and understanding this for the first time, and then seeing how they go and use it in all their other facets of their lives and careers afterwards, as well.

Tandi Palmer Williams (38:22):

I mean, I'm conscious that educating people basically is work. And people who (like me) who were on a journey can be a burden to people like you. So what are some of the things that we can do to be conscious of that and address, I guess, where we need help, and where we're asking for advice, what's best practise there?

Morwenna Collett (38:47):

Look, I think it's so important to pay people for their time and expertise that they might be sharing with you. People with disability get asked to do so much stuff for free, and there's so much emotional and physical labour that can come with that. So, if you're doing interviews or surveys with particular group of people, it's offering an honorarium or a fee, if possible. It's offering a survey incentive. It's around trying to make that acknowledgement that their contribution is valued and really important. And then also feeding back what you've done with that information. So, has it actually made a difference and has it led to change? So paying for people's expertise is a really important one for the disability community and one that we get feedback on a lot when organisations forget to do that, I think, because yeah, you're right. With disability and when there's other diversity areas, too, of course, it's around sharing lived experience and years and years of expertise that's been built up over a long period of time in many cases.

Tandi Palmer Williams (39:46):

So important. So, we've talked a bit about some of those steps or success factors for people on the journey. I'm curious if there's examples of what's happening across Australia of things that you get excited about or where you see change happening that we can learn from.

Morwenna Collett (40:07):

Something that I'm starting to see emerge more and more, particularly again in music, which I've been doing a lot of work in recently is this idea of relaxed performance. It's something that's been in the UK and the US for a good decade or so. And relaxed performances, I guess it's just having a more relaxed approach to noise and movement during a performance. So it can be really great for people that have sensory sensitivities, people who might be on the autism spectrum, for example. And it's about adjusting a performance to have appropriate noise levels, lighting, house lights might be up, doors might be open, there might be a visual or a sonic story document that people get in advance to explain how performance is going to go. So removing those elements, which can be unsettling or surprising to people. I think that is something we're starting to see more of, and are actually quite easy to implement. Again, with getting appropriate expertise on board to do that. But I think that's something I'm really excited by.

Morwenna Collett (41:11):

And then other things in the music industry that we're seeing. I'm doing a really exciting project at the moment with Music New South Wales looking at seeing whether we can set up the first accessibility charter for live music in this country, which would be having a tiered system of gold, silver, and bronze to be a bit of a rating system for venues and festivals, hopefully, to work towards to have that roadmap to go, "Okay, here's the access things I need to do to get to this level. And then here's the next things for this level," and so on. So I'm really excited to see where that one goes, and what happens next.

Tandi Palmer Williams (41:49):

How can people stay in touch with that work, and if they want to find out more about anything that you've mentioned?

Morwenna Collett (41:56):

I'm reasonably active on social media and have a website, morwennacollett.com, an e-newsletter there, too, that you can sign up to, to keep in touch and see what's happening. There's also great arts and disability organisations across the country. So Accessible Arts here in New South Wales, Arts Access Australia, and various equivalents in all the states and territories. So they're really good to have on your radar and look at who are the artists that they're working with, and the consultants and the advisors that they have in their mix, I think would be great to keep in touch with as well.

Tandi Palmer Williams (42:30):

Before we finish up, I'm curious to know what keeps you going? And really what you see is the ultimate benefit for those who dare to go down this path and who are making the commitment and making the investment where it's needed? I mean, what's the benefit that we'll see, do you think? And what keeps you motivated, and keep going?

Morwenna Collett (42:53):

Well, for me, I think it really comes back to that idea of exciting art-making and wanting to support artists who are making just the most incredible work. I think it's about arts organisations remaining relevant. It's about arts organisations reflecting the society that we live in. And I think if we lose touch of that, and what the human condition and the human experience is when it comes to art and art making, that would be a real shame. So, yeah, for me, it's around just making sure that we're relevant and reflective of the people around us, and telling authentic and genuine stories.

Tandi Palmer Williams (43:32):

Lovely. Well, thank you so much for your work in this space. I want to ask you one quick question before we finish up. As you know, this series is about real change and renewal. And if there's one thing that you think is the key to real change, or perhaps one tip that you haven't mentioned yet that you think is important, what would it be?

Morwenna Collett (43:53):

A great thing that we can all go away and do is make sure you know who are the disabled artists in your art form. So who is making... If you're a theatre company, who are some of our really exciting disabled theatre makers and theatre artists and just being across their work and having the curiosity to seek out work that you might not come across through traditional pathways or platforms, or people who may not come through traditional training pathways in our art form areas? So, for me, I think it's around finding out who are the key disabled artists and having a real look at the work that they're making and hopefully, falling in love and being excited by it.

Tandi Palmer Williams (44:33):

Beautiful. Well, thanks so much for coming on the podcast. As I said, such important work. Congratulations on everything you're doing and all the best with the future.

Morwenna Collett (44:43):

Thank you, Tandi. Thanks for having me.

Tandi Palmer Williams (44:45):

I think Morwenna has a gift for making accessibility achievable, and yet, she isn't afraid of the hard work required to make real progress in this area. My top takeaways from our conversation were number one, providing equity of access for everyone to enjoy the arts is not just a moral responsibility or a legislative requirement, but it can also be a boon for our artistic vibrancy, and our business models. Accessibility improvements are not just good for the 20% of us who experience disability. They're good for everyone - like size 12 font, which is, in my opinion, a total no-brainer.

Tandi Palmer Williams (45:24):

The third one is that some improvements take time and require consultation and planning, while others can happen immediately, and we should really embrace them to feel that sense of progress and move on to the harder things. Number four, quick wins can happen simply by doing things like adding access to templates that we use in our work, such as asking for access requirements as a part of event invitations to meetings, workshops, and shows, and adding an access line into our budget templates so we can have that contingency when someone needs us to provide access.

Tandi Palmer Williams (46:05):

Number five, many people with lived experience are happy to help, and peak bodies exist to help us make change, but we need to remember to pay people for their time and expertise. I was really inspired when Morwenna talked about the benefit for all of us of making these changes. And reminding me really that art and culture is a mirror and if we're not reflecting the full diversity of people around us, then what are we doing? This is an area I'm really passionate about, and there's so much to learn and apply. I'm definitely on the journey. But I personally am going to go on a bit of an access drive with things like image descriptions for our social media posts and infographics, cringing thinking of all the infographics we use without describing them for people who experience a vision impairment.

Tandi Palmer Williams (47:00):

I'd love to hear what you've taken away. So please reach out to me on Instagram at the Patternmakers or LinkedIn where I love to get a little bit ranty sometimes. Now last episode, I shared the most clicked research resource featured on our most recent newsletter, and this episode, I shall do the same. For all of you involved in strategic planning processes, which is everyone, you're going to thank me when you see this list of free strategy tools compiled by Julian Cole from the Planning Dirty Academy (great name). Now, some of these tools in the list you'll be familiar with. Others will be new, and I suspect could blow your tiny mind. They certainly have blown mine, and I've been playing around with tools like Semrush and SparkToro, and my brain is certainly firing.

Tandi Palmer Williams (47:50):

So, jump into the show notes and hop over to this link of free strategy tools. And the resource was actually featured in a newsletter which I love, which is from Story Things, a UK based agency that focuses on storytelling. And it's one of my all-time favourite newsletters that I've been reading since about 2014, and I just love it. So I'm going to pop a link to that newsletter in the show notes as well, along with our subscribe link for our culture insights and innovation updates, which come out once a month with all the research news that's important each month. And I'd love for you to subscribe if you're not already getting all those juicy bits in your inbox every month.

Tandi Palmer Williams (48:43):

If you heard something that you want to know a little bit more about, you can visit the show notes. These are a set of resources that my team compile on every episode, including the guest bios, key points covered, and useful links to resources mentioned in the conversation. You can access these at our website, www.thepatternmakers.com.au/theoryofcreativity, one word. Now, if you've made it to this point, then I have a favour to ask. Will you take 30 seconds to rate and review Theory of Creativity? And if you hit subscribe, you'll be helping more people hear these ideas, techniques, and tools so that collectively we can do even more good in the world. Sound like a plan?

Tandi Palmer Williams (49:24):

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body. It has been produced in collaboration with arts leaders around Australia. You know who you are. Thank you so much for your support. We'd like to acknowledge the traditional owners upon whose land this podcast is made, the Gadigal people of the Eora nation, and we want to acknowledge First Nations people everywhere.