

# WEBworks, a mentor's view

*A short essay written by Miranda Millward, in response to the Neither Use Nor Ornament project, funded by Arts Council England.*

---

A dark dreary Saturday in December ... I am in the Dance Studio at Arts at the Old Fire Station (AOFS) ... in the dark ... Hugh stands across the room with a camera, tripod and laptop ... Sonia is curled up with her head in my lap – my baby Jesus. I am Mary and I have my arms linked with the twenty year old daughter of my friend – she is my Joseph ... In the background there are several other people, including Naomi, variously being kings and angels ... oh and each of us has a torch or object that emits light ... how on earth did we get to this point – to this most unusual of nativities ...

The word mentor is variously defined as 'an experienced or trusted advisor' ... 'someone who advises or trains' ... 'giving help or advice over a period of time' ... one who 'counsels' and 'guides' ... in short a mentor should be someone who enables and is enabling ...

"  
The organisation WEBworks established in 2017 was created by Sonia Boué to be an enabling organisation using personalised, multi-modal and reflective mentoring techniques to enable a group of 'neurodivergent' (ND) artists to connect with each other; enjoy enabling peer support and develop their artistic careers and practice. WEBworks has the goal of enabling its members to be able to work on or above a level often seemingly easily accessed by their 'neurotypical' (NT) artist peers. In 2016, Sonia successfully completed an ACE (Arts Council England) Grants for the Arts application for her project on Felicia Browne - Through an Artists Eye. Navigating the application process as an ND artist flagged up to Sonia the potential pitfalls and struggles other ND artists might have. During 2017 Sonia again applied successfully for ACE R&D funding for the Museum of Object Research, and it was during this phase of her research and work on her own practice that Sonia became more interested in facilitating the development of other ND creatives she was meeting in person and online.

This essay seeks to unpick and highlight the very successful strategies WEBworks uses with some of its members as well as the ethical inclusive standards it has at its heart. It is a web that works; in discovering a need, and by naming the group WEBworks it has become real. Initially based in Oxford, the organisation now has members with varied practices in London, Birmingham and Kent.

It is worth noting that, outside of the Oxford based artists, the other WEBworks artists met via online contact. A number of the WEBworks artists are late-

diagnosed creatives who had previously lacked enabling peer support. Online blogs and forums are a key way for ND creatives to make contact with each other and fill in gaps in knowledge where information has not been picked up over time because of social isolation. Blogging can often be a means of self-discovery and a way to build previously absent cultural references. ND artists often find information is socially biased and therefore 'coded', and help is required to understand it and make it meaningful. An example of this would be Sonia's first successful ACE (Arts Council England) Grants for the Arts application. I supported Sonia as an access person using my knowledge and skills to help her make sense of the application process. Once successful, Sonia was able to share her insights into applying for funding via her blog, enabling other ND artists to use this decoded knowledge to access their own funding. WEBworks currently has seven members, with a number of other artists hoping to join once there is the opportunity - as the organisation grows, so does the web of influence.,

'Neurodiversity' is a term used to define the value of all neurological profiles. It draws on biodiversity as a model for thinking about human neurology. 'Neurodiversity' refers to all humans whereas 'neurodivergent' refers to humans who may differ from the supposed 'norm' – usually dyslexia, dyscalculia, ADHD, autism or bipolar. The term 'neurodiversity' suggests we need all kinds of brains to thrive as a species. This piece of writing seeks to define and capture what the strategies of WEBworks are, and how they are tailored to suit each member. WEBworks uses autistic leadership as an enabling force across its projects with a view to modelling and spreading this self-leadership and peer leadership as an achievable aspiration.

Meaningful relationships take time ... this is an often forgotten and inconvenient concept in the busy modern world – there is no substitute for the time it takes to build a genuine relationship and connection that works both ways. This relationship building has been hugely important for all the WEBworks artists (both before and during this project) and has happened in different modalities over different spans of time. Often the social and the work elements of the relationships need to blend, rather than switching between the work and social elements which can be confusing and disabling. Relationships are the key to WEBworks successes and this is often at odds with a wider public perception about autism, which is that the relational and relationships aren't of interest. Relationships have been built in person, online, via Skype/FaceTime, on the telephone and via e-mail ... all methods of communication are equal and valid - none are privileged. Some of the mentoring has only happened remotely, using cues such as social media comments and posts as a way to gauge whether it is time to 'check-in' and see if support is needed or not at key times.

At the heart of WEBworks is the use of highly personalised mentoring approaches. These approaches are developed over time as a part of the rich, person centred relationships Sonia has built in person and/or online. The mentoring can only commence when the parties involved are ready, and this ability to be ready can depend on many factors such as trust, timing, space to focus or having a goal in mind. In some cases, a re-indexing of past experience has to take place in order to put aside previous 'failures' or plateaus in order to be able to move forward. The mentoring allows for 'autistic time', where timescales are more fluid and allow people to move forward at their own pace. For some of the creatives, regularity was the key to success – regular weekly meetings enabled confidence to grow and build into something powerful. For others, mentoring check-ins could be spaced over a number of months. At the heart of the mentoring is the desire to build resilience. There is no one size fits all approach – a successful approach for one might not work for another. This is unlike many NT mentoring relationships, which often seek to move people from one distinct place to another within a finite and often similar time span. WEBworks works entirely at the right pace for the individual, accepting that the motivations and need for mentoring and support are very different. Realising that progress may not be linear and can sometimes feel uneven is something Sonia has accepted and worked with and in turn it has yielded impressive results.

WEBworks is itself a powerful network, but Sonia has also sought to maximise networks and relationships outside of the group for the WEBworks artists where appropriate. Hugh has received some useful support from a variety of sources – Sarah Jane Wiseman (Director: Sarah Wiseman Gallery) gave hugely important advice on showing work in a professional gallery context. Hugh has also benefitted immensely from working with Sarah Mossop, at AOFS in terms of producing and curating work for his recent successful exhibition in the Theatre Entrance Space, as well as support in organising thoroughly planning all aspects of his recent workshop. Naomi has received a prestigious film commission working on a three-year project with University of Kent via contacts initially made by Sonia. Sonia will support Naomi with this film commission as a form of collaborative mentoring. At the time of writing, it is hoped that Rhiannon Lloyd-Williams will have her play *The Duck* performed in the theatre space at AOFS after Sonia initiated her contact with the AOFS team. The WEBworks group will hold an exhibition together, *WEBs*, at the University of Kent as part of the Autism Arts Festival, 2019, brokered by Sonia for the group.

Within WEBworks relationships have lead to further professional opportunities. Sonia was able to use her decoded knowledge of applying for ACE funding to support Susan Kruse in gaining her own Grants for the Arts funding to develop her drawing practice digitally. Susan in turn used her knowledge and experience of

working at BOM (Birmingham Open Media) to support Sonja Zelić in developing her recent work *Dream of a Safe Place*, which was shown at BOM in late 2018.

Importantly ,the WEBworks artists have supported the progress and development of the NUNO project in a number of ways. Each member has considerable and unique skills and, where required, these have been deployed on the project, as paid work. Katherine has written copy text for the project to assist with marketing, press releases and audience development; Susan has developed and organised the website to make sense of the project for online audiences, and both Susan and Sonja have become a huge source of support to Sonia; Hugh has used his digital skills and substantial knowledge of the OVADA space to model layouts, and Naomi has been commissioned to use her extensive film making and editing skills to document aspects of the project in a series of short films. Rhiannon's poetry responds to every artist in the NUNO exhibition, weaving together another layer of meaning and relationship for the group! This gives the project an added ethical and inclusive dimension, enabling Sonia to call on those most invested in WEBworks to enable NUNO to be a success both for NT and ND artists involved.

So back to that most curious of nativity scenes, which proved to be a WEBworks triumph for so many reasons. The nativity scene was part of a Hugh's very successful *Still In Motion* photography workshop, which coincided with his hugely successful photography exhibition at the Old Fire Station in the Theatre Entrance Space. Hugh planned and developed with the help and support of Sonia and Sarah Mossop, (Visual Arts Programme Manager- Old Fire Station) a highly professional and enjoyable two hour long workshop which enabled all participants to try out a number of Hugh's self ,developed long exposure photography techniques using a variety of lighting gadgets created by Hugh. Hugh's affable delivery and presentation enabled the group to quickly feel at ease, and his ability to be flexible and allow participants to try out their own ideas gave the workshop huge energy. The nativity scene was one of several group experiments to create compositions.

In short, I think it is actually quite easy to define what enablement and inclusion is – it is what we all want for ourselves and our loved ones; the sense of feeling valued for yourself as you are; the feeling of genuinely being wanted; that you have a unique contribution to make; that you are the best at what you do; that you can take pleasure from your work and that your work has a sense of purpose; that people understand where you might struggle and seek to help; to have people to cheer your successes; to feel part of a team and to feel that you are not other - you are enough just as you are.

As to who mentors the mentor – well that’s me. I am so incredibly proud of Sonia and all that we have achieved together, and that she has achieved with and on behalf of her community. Remember as you look around this exhibition, explore the website, read this catalogue that this is just the beginning ... the WEBworks genie is well and truly out of the bottle and it won’t be going back in!

Miranda Millward – February 2019

Miranda has worked in visual arts learning and participation for over 20 years – initially as a mainstream art and design teacher in Secondary schools. In 2005 she set up her own freelance Arts Learning Consultancy working for arts organisations across the U.K. Miranda now works for the Oxford University Gardens, Libraries and Museums working across all six venues managing an in-depth partnership working with Iffley Academy an (Ofsted) Outstanding Special School which seeks to examine the potential of putting arts based learning at the heart of the curriculum.



Supported using public funding by  
**ARTS COUNCIL  
ENGLAND**