

Learning at the margins

My story takes place in Italy at the airport outside Milan after the Italian transnational meeting of February 2016. Damian Milton (autistic advisor) and I had taken a taxi to the airport and we had quite a bit of time before our flights and so we had time to talk. I had recently joined the project and it was my first transnational meeting. The immediate impact was a simple enjoyment of the conversation and the possibility of talking about the project in a more detailed and also personally-focussed way. I appreciated Damian's honesty and perception. One of the issues we talked about was his participation in the project and, by extension, autistic participation in the TAE more generally. As part of my PhD, the participation of autistic adults and children is quite important and the conversation with Damian made me think about this more in the context of the project. It also made me consider the extent to which learning can take place in unexpected situations and that we should always be open to the potential of this. What interested me was that this learning was happening in a satellite space - an airport - which is also a place of transition. I think there are links between this and the marginalised status of autistic people and how we (who are non autistic) can start to think about engaging better with autistic people. Perhaps we need to think about different environments and places rather than the mainstream institutions. The conversation with Damian was not the only factor, but this, and our subsequent discussions contributed to the fact that I planned much greater participation of autistic people in the Birmingham transnational meeting in October 2016, which I played a major role in organising. Across the week, I arranged for there to be a number of autistic speakers and presenters and also made sure there was a quiet room available at all times, as well as other forms of support. In fact, the majority of speakers and presenters were autistic, showing that their participation extended well beyond tokenism. Engaging with a number of autistic adults taught me to be patient about communication - to not necessarily expect quick replies to emails, for example, and to not interpret silence as meaning a lack of interest. The feedback forms from both the multiplier event and the transnational week as a whole demonstrated that the delegates and team members had really valued the participation of so many autistic adults. However, it is important to stress at this is still a

process and I the rest of the TAE team need to develop further the participation of autistic people in the project.

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