

Communication Ramps to Cultural Institutions: Identifying Barriers and Facilitators to Participation for Adults with Aphasia



Bernadine Gagnon, Susan Duncan, Mara Steinberg Lowe,
Mira Goral, Elizabeth Galletta, Amy Vogel-Eyny
on behalf of BrainNYC (Building Resources for Aphasia in NYC)

Participants will be able to:

Identify processes and partnership models that support communication access for people with aphasia across community settings.

Part 1: Existing Barriers: What limits communication access in cultural institutions?

- **People with aphasia face barriers across the full museum experience**, including planning visits, navigating spaces, and participating fully in museums, galleries, libraries, and performance venues.
- **Communication access is not prioritized like physical access:**
 - Institutions may have clear procedures for ramps, elevators, or captioning.
 - Aphasia-friendly communication supports often lack designated responsibility or ownership.
- **This can create “communication-hostile” environments:**
 - Noisy, crowded galleries.
 - Dense, jargon-heavy exhibit labels.
 - Hard-to-read websites.
 - Fast-paced tours with few visual supports or opportunities for clarification.
- **Staff training gaps can affect visitor experiences:**
 - Limited communication-partner training.
 - Interactions may feel rushed, avoidant, or unintentionally unsupportive despite good intentions.
- **Social and identity-related barriers compound access challenges:**
 - Past negative experiences (e.g., being ignored or misunderstood).
 - Reduced confidence and increased anxiety about cultural participation.
 - Limited visible inclusion or poorly advertised supports may create a sense that cultural spaces “aren’t for us,” despite strong interest in participation.
- **Institutional barriers limit sustained progress:**
 - Competing priorities.
 - Staff turnover.
 - Reliance on short-term pilots or one-time trainings rather than integrated, ongoing practice.
- **These barriers affect more than information access:**
 - They can limit identity, connection, belonging, and community participation for people with aphasia.
- **NYC accessibility reporting remains broad rather than communication-specific:**
 - Current city initiatives promote museum accessibility generally.
 - Public reporting does not provide museum-level data on:
 - Plain-language materials.
 - Easy-read resources.
 - Communication boards.
 - Aphasia-relevant communication supports.
- **Key takeaway:** There is a disconnect between broad accessibility goals and the specific, measurable communication supports needed for people with aphasia to participate fully in cultural institutions.

Part 2: Existing Facilitators: Share and compare initiatives, planning strategies, and partnership approaches that have been used to address these barriers.

- **Communication-access initiatives** in cultural institutions often begin with relationship-building, shared problem identification, and assessing readiness for change.
 - **Morgan et al. (2022)** showed a museum-based model at the Toledo Museum of Art, where docents were trained in Supported Conversation for Adults with Aphasia and community partners helped plan aphasia-friendly tours.
 - Similar benefits appear outside museums: **Tessier et al. (2021)** found communication partner training improved adapted transport drivers' knowledge, supportive communication, and gesture use.
 - **Facilitators** may include internal champions, prior accessibility work, adaptable programs, aphasia-friendly materials, and involvement of people with aphasia.
- **Our initiative** focuses upstream on partnership-building, institutional understanding of communication access, and planning conditions for feasibility.
 - At the **Museum of the City of New York**, a key facilitator was connecting with the Vice President of Education and Engagement, whose role aligned with programming, visitor experience, and community participation.
- In **museums/cultural institutions**, training alone is insufficient without attention to leadership support, workflow fit, staffing, institutional priorities, and sustainability.
 - **Implementation science** focuses on what makes communication strategies workable in real-world settings, not just evidence-based.
 - **Douglas et al. (2022)** found rapid growth in implementation science research (especially in aphasia), but noted many studies rely too heavily on training without broader implementation frameworks.
- Key implementation question: **Does communication access fit the institution's mission, staffing, and structures—and can it be sustained?**
 - This framing positions **communication access as part of an integrated inclusion, education, and community engagement**, rather than an add-on.



How could cultural institutions build seamless, fully inclusive “communication ramps” into their design from the outset?
