Imitation, interaction and dialogue using Intensive Interaction: tea party rules

MARK BARBER

Intensive Interaction has become widely used when building up communication with children with profound learning difficulties. Often practitioners understand Intensive Interaction to be primarily about imitation and Mark Barber shows how this can be a *mis*understanding that limits the kinds of interactions that can be enjoyed by conversation partners. The article explores how instead of just imitating, practitioners need to develop (wordless) conversations so they can follow the child's lead, introduce their own closely related ideas, provide variations and generally keep to the 'tea-party rules' developed by typically developing young children at play.

Key words: Intensive Interaction, imitation, profound learning difficulties, reflective practice.

There is a common belief that Intensive Interaction is just about imitation. This misconception is often expressed by people who have heard about the approach second hand and/or have not attended one of the increasing number of training days. It may also be the belief of people who have yet to experience the conversation that can develop when using Intensive Interaction to support their response to the potential communicative acts of someone with a profound intellectual disability and severe communicative impairment.

However, the belief that Intensive Interaction is just about imitation may also come about as the result of the isolation that may be experienced by a practitioner who, having attended a course or read a book a while ago, does not have the opportunity to repeatedly touch base and reflect with others who are using the approach. It can become very easy to fall into a single style of interacting, or to follow what Reason (1990) calls the 'well trodden path' of routine responding in familiar or apparently limited contexts.

This article describes the recent work of the teaching teams in two Australian schools who have joined in an initiative to refine and explore their interactive skills. The professional development and reflection is described, alongside the momentum that the schools have harnessed to build on the use of Intensive Interaction. Issues, discussions and developing concepts are outlined.

Based on their experience of using Intensive Interaction in classrooms, staff at Bayside Special Developmental School, Melbourne and Red Hill Special School in Brisbane[1] have reported that the approach has resulted in measurable progress in the levels of communicative involvement demonstrated by their students. These observations have been confirmed by an ongoing cycle of moderation in both settings, using the 'Framework for Recognising Progress' (Marvin, 1998; QCA, 2001; Firth, 2004; Barber, 2005). Recognizing the effectiveness of the approach with their students, the schools began to investigate methods of refining the skills of the practitioners involved, so that the approach might be delivered with increased insight.

Joining Red Hill Special School in an initiative that appeared promising, practitioners at Bayside SDS began a process of professional development in mid 2006. The staff involved in Intensive Interaction at both schools, have been voluntarily attending weekly meetings of up to, but not exceeding, ninety minutes. During these meetings, they present and observe video sequences of themselves and the learners with whom they work involved in Intensive Interaction. Both schools have since shared some interesting insights into the role of the practitioner within Intensive Interaction. The insights have largely resulted from the use of a reflective tool, devised by Williamson (2006) and introduced at Red Hill Special School.

The tool was developed from an original document published by the Australian National Schools Network (2003).

The Intensive Interaction reflection tool and 'protocols'

Williamson's reflective tool was designed to assist practitioners and their colleagues to reflect critically on their individual practice of Intensive Interaction. It is used by both the practitioner, who is presenting a short video (approximately ten minutes), and his or her peers (who become peer mentors) while viewing video footage of an Intensive Interaction session.

The aim of the tool is to assist the practitioners to reflect on their use of interactive strategies within the approach of Intensive Interaction in order to reflect, evaluate and plan for improved pedagogy. When presenters introduce the video, describing the setting and what will happen during the video, they might have a focus or question for those watching about which they request feedback. The tool was also developed with a view to assisting practitioners to give constructive, concise and informative feedback within their 'community of practitioners' (Firth, 2004). While the use of the tool will be briefly outlined in this article, it must be stressed that it should be used in association with awareness of the conventions involved in providing positive and constructive criticism or peer mentoring.

Intensive Interaction
Practitioner Reflection Tool

Developed by J. Williamson, Red Hill Special School, Brisbane, Qld, Australia [2006]

The following Reflection Tool is designed to assist practitioners and their colleagues/mentors to critically reflect on the practice of Intensive Interaction.
This tool should be used by both the practitioner and the mentor/s while viewing video footage of an Intensive Interaction session.
The aim of this tool is to assist the practitioner to reflect on their use of the strategies within the approach of Intensive Interaction, in order to self evaluate and plan for improved pedagogy.
The Protocols (Australian National Schools Network) have been considered in designing this Reflection Tool, with a view to assisting practitioners in providing constructive, concise and informative feedback.

Process

1. The practitioner/presenter gives an overview of the work (piece of video footage) that requires feedback. They provide a description of what they are doing/attempting to do (strategies) within the interaction. The presenter informs the group of all aspects of the interaction they feel the group should know. They (presenter) may highlight those specific strategies they believe are present within the interaction, and the areas they feel need improvement. The presenter may provide the group with a significant question for response, or a more general request for feedback on the interaction strategies they have demonstrated within the video footage.
(10 minutes)

2. The group, including the presenter view the video footage (twice if possible); no questions are asked at this time. The group utilise the Reflection Tool to record their observations of strategies/key features observed within the interaction. The focus of the viewing is on the practitioner, not the student.
(Up to 10 minutes)

3. The group asks clarifying questions of the presenter – that is questions that have a brief, factual answer, relating back to the presenters original query, or relating specifically to the footage e.g. what time of day was the footage taken? What was that noise in the background? These questions are who, what, where, when and how - not why. The presenter can answer these questions briefly - no discussion occurs at this stage.
(5 minutes)

4. The group may then request to view aspects of the footage again – with the purpose of posing probing questions to the presenter/group/ or formulating their feedback to the group/presenter. There may be some general discussion among the group – the presenter does not respond at this stage. The presenter may wish to record the groups' discussion/ points within the discussion to respond to at a later stage. During this time, the group records feedback on the Practitioner Reflection Tool – noting strategies viewed/not viewed/; key features observed/not observed; and formulating warm and cool feedback statements for the presenter. The presenter also self-reflects on their practice using the Practitioner Reflection Tool.
(15 minutes)

5. The members of the group then each provide feedback to the presenter – as per the Practitioner Reflection Tool. Each member provides their warm feedback first (up to 3 aspects). The presenter can write this feedback down, but does not respond at this stage. Then each member of the group provides cool feedback (up to 3 aspects). The presenter can write this down, but does not respond at this stage. The members of the group may also, following warm and cool feedback, ask probing questions of the presenter – to help the presenter clarify and expand his/her thinking about their practice. The presenter writes these probing questions down.
(10 minutes)

6. The presenter responds to warm and cool feedback, as well as any probing questions that have been raised. During this segment, other participants are quiet. The presenter may or may not choose to share their self-reflections with the group. The presenter may wish to highlight those aspects of the feedback that they identified in their self-reflection. The presenter highlights the feedback that they recognise has supported them to improve their practice. The presenter should thank the group for their feedback.
(10 minutes)

7. Open conversation – this is an opportunity for the presenter and members of the group to have a general discussion – usually not raising new issues, but may follow on from previous issues raised within the session. The group should remain cognisant of the discussion being open, supportive and inclusive of all members.
(5 minutes)

8. Feedback on the process
The full group provides feedback (debrief) on the process
(3 minutes)

Figure 1. Practitioner reflective tool (Williamson, 2006)

Intensive Interaction: Reflection Tool

Description of the session
Date, Where, time of day, context

Behaviours chosen to join in with:

Intensive Interaction strategies used:	**Describe the use of the strategy**
Giving Good Face / maintain touch	
Imitate	
Refer/Echo	
Follow persons lead	
Bursting/Pausing	
Being available/ maintain touch	
Extend	
Celebrate/Have Fun	
Intriguing	
Games	[Williamson,J & Barber,M 2006]

AIMS of Intensive Interaction:	
Social Cause and Effect	
Smiling	
Eye contact	
Turn taking	
Joint Attention/shared focus	
Social Contact	

Warm feedback

Cool feedback
Other behaviours that could be joined in with, other intensive interaction strategies to use, things that could be changed/avoided

What would happen if…..

Have you thought about……

[Williamson,J & Barber,M 2006]

Figure 2. Reflective tool evaluation sheets (Williamson, 2006; Barber, 2006).

Feedback: staff reflection

Initial questionnaires completed anonymously by practitioners (i.e., teachers, classroom support workers) after receiving feedback indicated that the process was welcome, useful and a positive exercise in terms of professional reflection and development. A common comment was that the group had identified positive aspects of practice of which the practitioners themselves were unaware. Practitioners also reflected that this process was a welcome end to the professional isolation often experienced during the years working in a classroom with a small team, sometimes only one other person. Additionally, the feeling was expressed that although appearing on a video in front of one's peers was an emotional challenge, it was well balanced out by having the opportunity to show peers how they worked and to discuss their nominated 'focus'.

The questionnaires completed by practitioners about giving feedback suggested that although individuals were comfortable giving 'warm feedback'[2] they found it challenging to express 'cool feedback'[2] in cogent, constructive phrases. This led to many reserving their cool feedback rather than giving offence. It was agreed that the *skill of giving 'cool feedback'* should become a focus of further in-house training.

Feedback: Intensive Interaction practice

Data recorded from reflective feedback given during the first term using the reflective tool established that all of the practitioners 'gave good face' (Nind and Hewett, 1994). They responded positively and interpretively, were attentive and within reach, used and celebrated physical contact, followed the learner's lead and focus of interest, allowed themselves to be directed into burst and pause dialogues, enjoyed themselves, followed the learners' idiosyncrasies playfully, and acknowledged and reacted responsively to their apparent preferences. Practitioners also took advantage of unplanned opportunities for shared anticipation that arose from repeated exchanges and responded to changes in the behaviours of their communicative partners.

Issues raised

Feedback to the presenting practitioners raised a number of issues:

> 'I wonder what might happen if you immediately followed J's vocal sound, instead of inviting him to continue to play the "pat the floor" game?' (i.e., cool feedback)

Having successfully gained the interest of the learner through the use of imitation (that is, imitating their action or sound), practitioners often tried to continue with the successful sound, for example, rather than move on with the learner's variation.

Practitioners reflected on their tendency to attempt to continue a successful exchange, rather than adjusting quickly enough to the changed contribution now being given by the learner.

> 'What do you think might have happened if you had of paused or slowed down your responses?' (i.e., cool feedback)

> 'Do you think M would be interested if you gave a deep stroke on her arm rather than continuing to imitate her moan?' (i.e., cool feedback)

> 'What do you think might have happened if you had suggested a change of direction when T was leading you by the hand?' (i.e., cool feedback)

There was frequent reflection concerning practitioners' difficulties in remembering to vary their contribution during *what had become* established games or physical dialogues. Having watched the videos, there was concern that they often fell into responding by imitation, rather than developing it; *possibly* by echoing a pattern of sound with a pattern of touch (Caldwell, 2002), or responding to a loud sound with facial drama, or by simply being playfully obtuse in the face of a student trying to return them to a particular place in the room for the seventh time!

> 'It's really hard to remember to vary what you do, or think about what you might do next, when you can't slow time down . . . and it's happening now.'

Following cool feedback, involving questions phrased in terms of '*What might happen if you . . .*' or '*Have you considered . . .*', there was acknowledgement that practitioners found it challenging to maintain variation in their conversational responses, *especially* with learners who had very restricted movement or repertoires of voluntary behaviour. However, there was also recognition that pauses or responding in a manner that reflected the learner's action but did not mirror it exactly, i.e., echoing (Caldwell, 2003), were often a very powerful *way* of responding. It had been noticed that using 'familiar but different responses' (*ibid.*) during an established dialogue often appeared to heighten the learner's focus on the interaction rather than the pattern of repetition.

It was the more experienced practitioners who were likely to vary their reaction from imitation to the use of the timbre or essence of the behaviour as a response. They were also more likely to adjust their response so that it might occur alongside the learner's behaviour, or to fill the learner's entire pause; for example, only pausing when the learner restarted. It was noted that more experienced practitioners would occasionally draw out or 'tease' out (Nind and Hewett, 1994) a 'pause' following a repeating exchange, in a manner which increased the less skilled partner's interest. This use of the occasional pause also promoted an opportunity in which the learner was set up to express their

anticipation spontaneously, and for the practitioner to acknowledge and celebrate it with them.

Indeed, we all noticed that what characterized the more experienced practitioners was the less hurried delivery of their response when compared to practitioners who were in their first year of using the approach. As the original texts all say, it must be *fun* for both communicators!

Finally, in addition to queries about the effect of positioning on a learner's ability to communicate or join in (for example, on the floor mats/in the sand pit/in the playground/in a wheelchair), one of the issues that surprised all practitioners was the amount of competing noise and peripheral movement nearby that learners were having to cope with.

Communicating, or providing an event?

The feedback appeared to establish that the vast majority of practitioners recognized what Intensive Interaction should look like. However, even though the practitioners were certainly being interactive (Collis and Lacey, 1996; Nind, 2000), what became apparent in the reflective sessions was that practitioner and learner were not necessarily involved in two-way conversations; rather, the practitioners were often simply responding like an 'event'. Having used the ideas expressed in many publications to attract and establish a mutual acknowledgement of each other's presence, some practitioners were finding difficulty in maintaining a responsive conversation over time:

> 'Sometimes it looked as if H was reaching for your mouth and the sound, i.e., that the sound was the attraction; what might have happened if you hadn't taken that as the signal but responded to the movements she was making?'

From the reactions and expressions of the learner, it appeared that the game of mutual response was recognized and established. However, practitioners wanted to avoid getting to the point at which the response itself might become the focus of the game, rather than an exploration of communication and the behaviours that sustain social encounters.

Intensive Interaction enables a social relationship to develop between skilled and less skilled or preintentional communicators, beyond the apparent 'intrigue' that a learner is likely to display when they recognize something of themselves happening somewhere else. But how do practitioners facilitate such a dialogue while following the learner's pace and adhering to the fundamental principle of the approach that they should *respond* rather than *suggest*?

While imitation is certainly an important feature of Intensive Interaction, especially as the practitioner is attempting to get an invitation to play, limiting the

exchange to this form of dialogue can be unhelpful, even when the practitioner replicates the learner's variety of sounds or actions flexibly. Limiting the palette of one's response to one type of reply renders the dialogue into an action–response pattern. While there is certainly security, recognition and predictability for the learner in this, it can become limiting if it defines the conversation rather than creates a context for exploration and play. Falling into a single type of response frequently leads to a communicative dead end, an exchange that becomes entrenched in repetition of the learner's action, movement or sound**.**

It is acknowledged that for some learners with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities, Intensive Interaction might simply follow the characteristics of the behaviours available to the learner, whose enjoyment and learning comes from their increasing recognition of repetitive turn-taking interactions and patterns of mutual response. However, the approach is also used to underpin interactions with learners (for example at Bayside SDS) who have more flexibility of actions and a tendency to become transfixed by completely recognizable patterns.

The practitioner who simply responds with imitation becomes in many ways like the event caused when a switch is activated; i.e., the skilled partner is either 'on' or 'off'. For the learner, who may experience a range of difficulties in perceiving the practitioner from other confusing sensory information that competes for his or her attention, the 'event' can become the focus, rather than the communicative partner or the interaction.

There is something pivotal about the fluid manner in which the practitioner approaches an encounter that makes Intensive Interaction such a facilitative and effective way of helping someone to learn about communicating and being social.

The discussion phase of this process of professional reflection is often the time when discourses develop concerning the 'process' underlying the interaction, rather than its content, leading to increased insights into the communicative process. The realization that practitioners occasionally fall into responding with an 'event' rather than a conversational response has led to much discussion at both schools. This has gradually led to a manner of operating in established interactions, which is characterized by practitioners maintaining the idea of *staying in the grey*, or maintaining a dialogue through introducing related variations, rather than simply responding in an *on/off* manner, or *black and white* style of responding. It is often entirely possible to support a learner in a familiar conversational 'subject' while exploring the occasional linked conversational topic.

Tea party rules

Possibly the most important aspect to emerge from the process of reflection at Bayside SDS occurred when a very

experienced teacher who had not attended any Intensive Interaction training requested the 'Core Group' of practitioners to observe her playing with a child, and then to give her feedback using the reflective tool.

The video demonstrated the many aspects between general good practices with 'beginning communicators' (Light, Parsons and Drager, 2002) that overlap with Intensive Interaction. However, the exercise also highlighted for the Core Group what it was that they did in their classrooms that was different from 'normal play with a child'. This difference centred on following the learner's focus of interest and adopting it demonstratively and sensitively, rather than suggesting their own agenda. Intensive Interaction importantly involves a willingness on the part of the more skilled partner to immerse themselves in the sensory world of the learner as much as is possible, rather than attempting to invite the learner into the adult world.

Following the notion of *staying in the grey* (see also Barber, 2007), the analogy emerged that during open ended social encounters the skilled partner's manner of operating was similar to that adopted when they attempted to gain entry into a beginning communicator's private game. The 'tea party analogy' (Bowen, 2006) emerged, coming about following several attempts to express the assistive manner in which an interactive conversation can be developed through positive and sensitive responding. The analogy illustrates the manner in which the practitioner follows the contributions of the learner.

The tea party analogy uses an almost universally recognized setting to describe the manner in which simple responding begins to facilitate a dialogue that is centred on the learner's version of meanings. It makes use of our parenting skills and understanding of the playful co-operation that many of us unconsciously know about and use to synchronize ourselves with a less skilled partner's perspective of the world, to get an invitation into a mutually understandable dialogue that is structured by the learner.

Acting out this analogy has since been successfully used to assist untrained staff to gain an initial grasp of how to 'do' Intensive Interaction.

'Tea party analogy' (Bowen, 2006)

Setting . . .

. . . you go to a friend's house and the two-year-old is having a tea party with the teddies (e.g., pouring out the tea, etc.)

The encounter . . .
The child looks at you . . .

When you go and join in the game with the child, you have a fair idea of the 'tea party rules' and are able to become part of the action and conversation, because you have played similar games before with your own or your friend's children. . . . It's irrelevant that you don't know anything about the child – he may hate carrots and love opera but that doesn't influence the way you join the tea party.

In the beginning, the tea party is all one way . . .

You may pick up the jug, saying, 'I need more milk' and the child may take it off you and say, 'That's not the milk, that's the Milo(tm)' and so the game continues on the child's terms and anything you suggest may be rejected, but you co-operate with what the child is doing and follow the topics proposed.

However, over the course of the game you are able to put more of your ideas forward and they become part of the conversation, e.g., 'No thanks, I've had enough tea, but I would like a chocolate biscuit. Do you have any?' The child may pick up on this and say, 'Yes, here you are', or 'No, but I have cake'; and so the conversation develops, becoming more of an extended two-way dialogue.

In the same way, in Intensive Interaction if, through your observations over time, you pick up the behaviours that you can go and join in with, you can also play a game. You don't need to know anything else about the child (maybe he loves opera and hates carrots, too) but it is also not relevant knowledge to play the game!

So, with Intensive Interaction, over time you move away from the direct imitation and start to suggest linked variations and contributions, while staying within the shape of the exchange. You do this by suggesting more of your own ideas, based on what the child is doing, but *within the tea party game* (e.g., echoes, similar sounds) and following the shape of the child's game (e.g., pauses and repetitions).

While your suggestions may or may not be accepted and woven into the child's own activity, as the conversation extends it becomes more two-way. Although the child may take on some of your suggestions, your part of the game is to be a willing and active participant in his version of what is happening.

The analogy illustrates that it is not only important to tune in with what the learner offers in the way of repertoires and contexts, but that what is at the centre of the approach is the facilitative manner in which the skilled partner supports the learner's contribution. The learner is always the hub around which the interaction revolves.

The experience of the two very different schools is that since beginning to use Intensive Interaction on a daily basis, there have been noticeable changes in the arousal, emotional well-being and engagement of their learners. The process of professional reflection has nurtured an increasingly sustainable culture of Intensive Interaction and valuable discourse among all staff members. On reflection, it

has been acknowledged that practitioners have relaxed the boundaries that, for them, had previously defined communication. Students are not expected to communicate using the typical conventions or codes. Rather, practitioners get to know the learner's signals and support them to lead and control the direction of the interaction while, over time, occasionally offering linked topics but not insisting on them being used. Communication is becoming a flexible two-way street of mutual adaptation, rather than an impenetrable problem for learners who do not yet know that their behaviours can be 'read' by those around them, but enjoy the game of being social.

Notes

1. Bayside SDS Moorabbin, Vic 3189, provides education to learners with severe-profound intellectual disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders.
   Red Hill Special School, Red Hill, Brisbane Qld 4059, provides education to learners with profound intellectual and multiple disabilities.
2. *Warm Feedback* describes comments that are explicit and identify strengths, whereas *Cool Feedback* describes comments that are framed as questions and which are intended to raise issues to promote broader, deeper thinking about one's practice.

References

AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL SCHOOLS NETWORK (2003) *The Heart of Teaching 'Protocols' Kit.* http://www.ansn.edu.au/resources/

BARBER, M. (2005) Intensive Interaction; some practical considerations. *PMLD Link*, Winter, Vol 17, No 3, Issue 52.

BARBER, M. (2007) Intensive Interaction; staying in the grey. *PMLD Link*, Spring, Vol 19, No 1, Issue 55, 22–28.

BOWEN, K. (2006) Personal communication.

CALDWELL, P. (2002) *Learning the Language: Building Relationships with People with Severe Learning Disability, Autistic spectrum Disorder and Other Challenging Behaviours.* Brighton: Pavilion.

CALDWELL, P. (2003) *Crossing the Minefield.* Brighton: Pavilion.

COLLIS, M. and LACEY, P. (1996) *Interactive Approaches to Teaching; a framework for Inset.* London: David Fulton.

FIRTH, G. (2004) *A Framework for Recognising Attainment in Intensive Interaction.* Leeds Mental Health NHS Trust.

LIGHT, J., PARSONS, A. and DRAGER, K. (2002) There's more to life than cookies: developing interactions for social closeness with beginning communicators who use AAC. In Reichle, J., Beukelman, D. and Light, J. (eds.), *Exemplary Practices for Beginning Communicators, Implications for AAC.* Baltimore, MD: Brookes.

MARVIN, C. (1998) Teaching and learning for children with profound and multiple learning difficulties. In P. Lacey and C. Ouvry (eds.), *People with Profound and Multiple Learning Disabilities; A Collaborative Approach to Meeting Complex Needs.* London: David Fulton.

NIND, M. (2000) Teachers' understanding of interactive approaches in special education. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 47, 2, 183–199.

NIND, M. and HEWETT, D. (1994) *Access to Communication.* London: David Fulton.

QCA (2001) *Planning, Teaching and Assessing the Curriculum for Pupils with Learning Difficulties.* Sudbury: QCA Publications.

REASON, J. (1990) *Human Error.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

WILLIAMSON, J. (2006) Reflective tool for Intensive Interaction. Unpublished document available from Red Hill Special School, Brisbane, Queensland, Australia.

Correspondence
   Mark Barber, PhD
   Consultant in Profound Intellectual Disability and
   Severe Communication Disability
   Melbourne, Victoria
   Australia
   Email: drmarkbarber@hotmail.com