

Learning to communicate using other people's language
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The lives of many individuals with severe or profound intellectual and multiple disabilities are frequently dominated by long periods of boredom, or the routine experience of days filled with activities which, although they might recognise - they don't understand. Left to fill in time, they frequently generate their own sensory events eg making vocal noises; rocking; mouthing; hyperventilating; head rubbing; grinding teeth.

These sensations can be understood as being events that stand out from the rest of the day in that they are events that can be accomplished when the learner wants them to be accomplished. But perhaps more importantly, these events can be stopped as and when they wish them to be stopped. To the observer, they frequently don't appear to have any reason behind them - but before we make that judgement, ask yourself ; why is it that when you sit on a bus or a train, you invariably see someone repeatedly spiralling a lock of their hair around their finger? [answer: because 'its nice']. Why do many people cross their legs when they sit down? It has no reason, and indeed might be bad for circulation.....so what's the point of *that*?

These behaviours are usually quite pleasant for the person doing them and they appear to address a need of some sort, and for whatever reason, these self directed, repetitive unitary behaviours often become quite a feature of what we see someone with a profound intellectual disability demonstrating, when they have no other focus for their attention. It must also be remembered, that for someone with a profound intellectual disability, who is described as 'preintentional' [ie they don't know about communicating on purpose], social conventions of politeness are completely unknown.

'Learners with Profound I.D. clearly differ from pre-intentional infants without disabilities.... They have had much longer than infants without I.D. to learn repeated patterns of unusual behaviours e.g. stereotypy or self-injury (Ephraim, 1997; Caldwell, 1996) as ways to reduce stress and shut out the unsafe external world or to provide interest in an otherwise understimulating environment.' Samuels [2003]

People experiencing severe-profound intellectual disability, with what are known as 'autistic spectrum disorders' also sometimes demonstrate what many people consider to be unusual behaviours, although the reasons for them doing so are often very different. The cycles of behaviour might act as a smoke screen which obscures, or takes their mind off, the often scary and unpredictable world around them. But they might also be a less socially restrained version of the 'sensory conversation' we have with ourselves, when we sit on the sofa, cross one leg over the other and watch TV . Whether they are repeated cycles of behaviour, or just one or two of the limited range of physical movements, that the learner has discovered that they can do; they are different from the myriad other events that the person experiences in a given day, because the *learner* initiates them *and recognises them as their own*.

Intensive Interaction

Intensive Interaction is an approach to supporting the development of very early communication, social agency and provides a context in which learners can explore the behaviours which sustain interaction. The approach is based on using behaviours that the learner will recognise as their own to develop a two way dialogue, through which the fundamental communication skills and enjoyment of social interaction can be learnt. [eg Hewett & Nind, M 1998; Nind& Hewett1994; 2001;2006]

Starting Intensive Interaction

Having decided that this approach might be appropriate for a learner you're working with, you should begin by observing them closely, and note the behaviours that they use to 'talk to themselves' or use to have a 'sensory conversation'.

Initially you might imitate the behaviours you see, to advertise your presence; intriguing or attracting the learner's attention from what Caldwell [1996] calls 'solitary space' or the internal pleasure loop that the person finds in the predictable comfort of their behaviour. When the learner looks around and recognises 'their' behaviour happening somewhere else, their interest and focus momentarily moves from focussing on internal pleasure, crossing into 'social space' ie they focus their attention on you, the practitioner, and what you are doing.

Imitation might continue to attract the learner's attention and at some point they may pause in their activity to monitor you, to check if you are still doing it. Once there appears to be a 'recognition' or connection between the two communicators [and this might take a few approaches], you might begin to 'reflect' the learner's behaviour ie making sure you pause in your imitation when you see learner restart their activity. At this stage, its all about responding and being recognisable.

Once the 'game' is established, which might take minutes, hours, or more rarely; repeated encounters over days; and there is some level of established mutual recognition, or recognition of the 'game', it may be time to 'converse'.

Before going on to conversing; an analogy:

I had spent four days in a huge South American hotel where nobody spoke English. I ate breakfast and dinner in a room with over 100 other residents and could not converse with them. When I entered the dining room I saw a sea of faces, but related to none of them. As I left the hotel on the Friday morning, I heard someone checking in, in English, at the desk. I glanced around and saw him for around 5 seconds as I left the building to get my taxi to work. That night, as I entered the dining room, I scanned the sea of faces and immediately recognised the other English speaking resident.....I remembered him because he was suddenly significant – he spoke my language.

When you attract someone's attention using Intensive Interaction, you find common ground; you begin to share a language; you immediately make yourself prominent; you

stand out from all of the other events, people, sensations or sounds that wash over them and around them, as they effectively 'free- fall' through their day.

Conversations

Conversations involve mutual adjustment. They often involve exchanges of ideas, topics and themes. When we converse we look for common ground and explore it. Conversations dominated by imitation don't really satisfy either partner. But it is possible to vary the topic while still following the same subject – eg talking about cars might involve Fords, Toyotas, Chryslers, Datsuns, convertables, 4X4s, SUVs, dragsters, hatchbacks and F1. Similarly, conversations in Intensive Interaction can vary around topics. Through games and dialogues based on the sounds and/or movements that the learner makes, the exchanges enable the learner to explore and experiment, so over time they learn to recognise what it is s/he does, that makes us do the things s/he wants us to do. At the same time, as the skilled communicator, you are *already* equipped to be able to assist the learner to explore 'game formats' in which you can join with their focus; explore mutual anticipation; eye gaze ; physical dialogues; patterns of touch, reciprocity, expressing emotions, remembering and returning to familiar games. The practice of Intensive Interaction involves enjoyment of social time and using communication as a context for developing an awareness of others.

Understandable social transactions are a profoundly important aspect to anyone's quality of life. Conversations and dialogues based on familiar content and mutually negotiated rules help to break the remorseless cycle of isolation and passive recience that many learners with complex intellectual disability routinely experience .

As these dialogues progress, as the skilled communicator, we may be tempted assign intent to the behaviours of some learners, by reading their facial expressions and/or body language. But important as this may be; our purpose is *not only* so that we can acknowledge their communication and then act accordingly, but that the learner, who is *unaware that they are communicating*, learns that s/he has control – that s/he comes to understand that it's their actions that cause our response.

This is not something we can task analyse and teach step by step; rather, learning occurs when we provide the environment that allows the learner to recognise something is happening because of something s/he does.

It is sometimes tempting for practitioners to concentrate their attention on teaching the *performance* of communication. The actions associated with communication present data which is quite convenient to record, train and generate predictive goals around. However it is more valuable to gain evidence of the level of a learner's involvement in the *process* of communication. The functions of communication are something we learn by experience and involvement – they are not behaviours we are taught.

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