

Intensive Interaction ; Staying in the Grey
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When you ask some people who have heard something about Intensive Interaction, 'so what's it all about?' they often respond 'oh its when you imitate the learner.....if they make a noise, you make it back, or if they move their hand, you move yours in the same way' Is that it?

Well no, its not. Intensive Interaction is about having a conversation with someone, but basing the conversation on the things that are familiar to them and that they understand. True, *initially* you would attract their attention by imitating their behaviours, but that's only the beginning.

People who experience profound intellectual and /or physical & sensory disabilities often have a real struggle making sense of the world around them and of the events in which they are frequently engulfed. In addition, their experience of consciousness may be dominated by inaction; confusion, boredom or sensory disturbances....including pain.

Understanding the world...or not

Pre intentional learners are likely to have great difficulty anticipating what is going to happen next, or in predicting imminent events, simply because they cannot recognise, 'read', or make sense of the situation in which they find themselves. They just don't have the 'joined up' or interconnected picture of the world that other learners, who have successfully 'learned how to learn', usually acquire.

Furthermore, it is completely uncontroversial to suggest that people who don't have control over what happens to them [i.e. cant set off events and similarly cant stop the things that happen to them], usually develop learned helplessness.

This is especially prevalent when they may have e.g;

- very limited or inconsistent ways of communicating which frequently lead to an ambiguity of meaning
- acquired a tendency to acquiesce to the suggestion of others and an inability to contradict [another's] interpretation [Grove Bunning Porter 1999]

The secret of life is to pass time pleasantly

Learners whose lives are dominated by long periods of boredom, or the experience of days filled with activities which, although they might recognise - they don't understand; frequently generate their own sensory events eg; making noises; rocking; mouthing; hyperventilating; head rubbing; grinding teeth. These sensations can be understood as being events that they can do when they want to do them, but also stop them when they want to. To the observer, they frequently don't appear to have any reason behind them - but before we make that judgement; why is it that when you sit on a bus or a train, you invariably see someone repeatedly spiraling 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' [i.e. 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. But 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 recognizes them as their own.*

Starting Intensive Interaction

So when someone starts doing Intensive Interaction, they should observe the learner they are working with, and note the behaviours that the learner uses to 'talk to themselves' or have a sensory conversation. Initially the practitioner might imitate the behaviours they see, to advertise themselves; intriguing or attracting the learner's attention from what Phoebe Caldwell 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 recognizes 'their' behaviour happening somewhere else, their interest and focus momentarily moves from focusing on internal pleasure, into 'social space' i.e. focusing their attention on the practitioner and what they are doing.

Imitation might continue to attract the learner's attention and at some point they may pause in their activity to monitor the practitioner, to check if they're still doing it. Once there appears to be a 'recognition' or connection between the two communicators, the practitioner might begin to 'reflect' the learner's behaviour i.e. making sure to pause their imitation when they see learner restart their activity. It's all about responding and being recognizable. 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, its 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 recognized 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 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 – e.g. talking about cars might involve Fords, Toyotas, Chryslers, Datsuns, convertibles, 4X4s, SUVs, dragster, hatchbacks and formula 1. Similarly, conversations in Intensive Interaction can vary around topics.

Claire, a young learner with a cortical visual impairment, profound intellectual disability and multiple physical disabilities, spent many hours of the day hitting the table surface attached to her wheelchair, with the knuckles of her hand, in bursts of 5-15 impacts, with a regular tempo. Having extremely compromised sight, she could not get interest from the visual world, and so filled her consciousness with other types of sensation; her hitting the table created a sound and a sensation of her making. From Claire's perspective, we were just another noise in her already noise saturated sensory world. Her experience of 'other people' [whom she had never seen] composed of the sensations of being touched and of many different voices, with various amounts of familiarity.

Other than the sounds and sensations she created, she could be described as 'freefalling' through the sounds of her peer's voices, voices of staff, traffic noise, fans whirring, doors opening; phones ringing.....etc. She was largely unable to control [i.e. to cause them to start or stop] any of the events that involved her.

An initial connection was established through repeated, imitative exchanges of her rhythmic impacts on the table surface. After several weeks, we established that she was attending to our contribution; it was noted that if we began hitting the table simultaneously with her, she stopped tapping and stilled, listening. Following Phoebe Caldwell's principles of being 'familiar but different', we began to 'echo' the sound Claire made. 'Echoes' use the 'timbre' or nature of the learner's behaviour, but give the essence back to them in a different sensory mode. We tapped her arm in the same rhythm that Claire used on her table. As conversations developed, we tapped her leg; or said her name; or gently patted her hair; or blew on her cheek; or clapped our hands; or tapped her hand; but all the time, using her rhythm and her sense of timing and pauses. If she tapped out a long phrase, we responded in kind. Claire listened and responded in her 'voice' [hitting her table-top] her interest remained highly engaged and she smiled frequently.

Currently, on the occasions that she sighs, lip-smacks or vocalizes ; we respond with imitation – suggesting that this different conversation is available, but not insisting that she takes it. She has responded on several occasions to our vocal imitations and her classroom staff have swapped several exchanges of sounds with her, although Claire's main topic is still tapping. In the meantime, her conversations cover many topics and many variations – we still talk about tapping, but we can explore different speeds, phrasing, and weight of tap'

Yes, Intensive Interaction does involve imitation, but it also involves developing an awareness of others, joint focus; turn taking; responding predictably; mutual anticipation; enjoyment of social time; eye gaze ; physical dialogues; patterns of touch, reciprocity, expressing emotions,

having the opportunity to practice the behaviours that sustain social encounters; exploring agency, learning to remember and return to familiar games; and for practitioners, what Dave Hewett calls 'giving good face' or maintaining your presence in the learner's consciousness.

If you simply respond to a learner's behaviour by providing an event [e.g. reading, massage, a repeated phrase from a favorite song etc] or simply by imitating; you might be being interactive, but you are not necessarily doing Intensive Interaction. If you are simply responding to a learner with 'an event', the event is either *happening* or it is *not happening* [i.e. it is 'off' or it is 'on']. It's a 'black' or 'white' situation.

You are doing Intensive Interaction if you are in 'the grey'

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For more information on Intensive Interaction, look at

www.intensiveinteraction.co.uk

www.bild.org.uk [look at information page 009]

www.drmarkbarber.co.uk

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