

Supporting people with complex intellectual disabilities using Intensive Interaction

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Imagine having a conversation with someone without using any words, where the meanings of signals and gestures may not be recognised and even facial expressions might not be easily understood. The person you are interacting with may recognise and enjoy your enthusiasm and the emotional ‘timbres’ in your voice, but will probably not be able to ‘read’ your intent.

In order to find common ground with the person and support them to understand you, you would probably respond to some of their actions- the ones

that seem to convey their emotions or that indicate what they are interested in, but this will be a conversation where what is said and done is going to be less important than the shared moments of joint attention and emotional fusion that you can arrive at together.

If you had such a conversation, you would be doing something called Intensive Interaction and you
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would be using something called 'phatic' (Pearce, 1989; Senft, 2009) communication.

Intensive Interaction is an approach to supporting people with significant intellectual and often multiple disabilities, often in association with autism, to learn about communication and what being involved in social interaction might involve. The approach is grounded in the work of psychologists Bruner, Brazeldon, Trevarthen, Piaget, Bowlby, Stern and Vygotski, and was developed at Harperbury School in UK by Dr D Hewett and Dr M Nind in 1980s-90s, largely in response to the perceived failures of the reward based, goal focussed approaches to teaching and interventions that were prevalent at the time and in some places continues.

The practice of this teaching and learning approach focusses on exploring the fundamental skills that underpin our ability to be social. Communication learning is supported within naturalistic and open ended exchanges that respond to the learner's foci and interests. This promotes a context for them to be included in and to learn through activities that act as 'live active meaningful rehearsals of the arts, skills, techniques, expertise and concepts of being a communicator... carried out by the learner in partnership with someone who is already an expert' (Hewett, 2012).

Intensive Interaction focusses on supporting development in foundational aspects of communication which, it is argued, (eg Hewett, 2012) underpin all subsequent and more complex learning. These aspects of communication are known as the 'Fundamentals of Communication' (Hewett, 2001; 2012) and include:

- enjoying being with another person
- developing the ability to attend to that person
- concentration and attention span
- learning to do sequences of activity with the other person
- taking turns in exchanges of behaviour
- sharing personal space
- using and understanding eye contacts

- using and understanding facial expressions
- using and understanding physical contacts
- using and understanding non-verbal communication
- using vocalisations with meaning
- layers of emotional understandings
- learning to regulate and control arousal levels.

Intensive Interaction recognises the futility of using interventions based on language or symbolic referents with people who demonstrate no apparent awareness of themselves as learners, Intensive Interaction focusses on using what the learner finds interesting as the context and often the content for engagement and learning. It is not agenda led, target focused or 'objectives' driven. It is a 'process central approach' where rather than outlining full descriptions of intended learning goals and driving toward them, the focus is on supporting learning to arise and emerge from activities that are open ended and learner led.

How do you start to use Intensive Interaction?

"Intensive Interaction fosters meaningful communicative opportunities with those who might otherwise be considered impossible to reach. ... It encourages (learners) to engage fully and empowers them to understand that they can affect the actions of those around them" (<http://www.complexneeds.org.uk/>)

Following a period of intense observation to identify the idiosyncrasies, interests and foci that the learner often returns to, the person doing the supporting tries to intrigue the learner's interest and attention by answering, imitating or joining them in their focus in a conversational style that creates a burst and pause pattern in which the rhythms of shared social activity can emerge. The practitioner always remains within the 'cognitive and affective reach' (Daniels, 2015) of the person and works on the basis that 'no matter how idiosyncratic the behaviour, it needs to be interpreted as having the potential for interaction' (Nind & Powell, 2000).

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The initial connection might be made through movement, rhythm, vocal or body sounds, or whatever the learner seems most interested in at the time. It is not the skills of the learner that enables them to interact successfully but the skills of the person supporting and interpreting them. Their support is predicated on their willingness to adapt the rules of conventional conversation so that they include and respond recognizably to the contributions of the person they are supporting.

Following and joining the interest or activity seems to spotlight the 'teacher person' as a readable and significant option in surroundings which the learner often finds overwhelming or uninteresting. The practitioner's first step is to try to see the situation from the perspective of the learner; to attract an invitation to enter the learner's activity, so that what might be described as common narratives, interactive games or 'frames' (Bruner, 1981) emerge and with repetition become progressively established, returned to and enjoyably explored. Actually, it's called building a relationship and it is something that professionals seem often to forget about or be discouraged from doing, but it turns out that it's the basis of much of our social interest and engagement. 'Engagement is the context in which learning takes place' (Hobson 2002). 'The process is active when two participants are engaged with each other and sharing the flow of enjoyable and interesting behaviour. (Hewett, 2012)

Experimenting and exploring

The practitioner of Intensive Interaction is focussed on being motivating enough to fuel sustained activities in the learner's zone of proximal development, on responding in a way that draws their attention to the deep structures underpinning sustained social encounters, promoting assimilation and accommodation. In practice, once there is a familiarity with the idea that the practitioner is limiting their role to that of responding, hesitation creates a space for and places the onus on the person doing the learning, to contribute. Skilled partners can thus support increasingly consistent experimentation

of new connections in the learner's thinking by pausing, hesitating, waiting for intent or interest as established themes are revisited. As the familiarity of the 'game' promotes more assured repetition and nuance, the emerging neural pathways that lead to it become incrementally stronger as the game is returned to and re-rehearsed.

While these constructs might be prominent in the intent of some educators, clinical psychologists or speech and language therapists, it is pointed out that practitioners in other settings aim much more at ideas of 'spending time with', 'playing' 'supporting' 'understanding', 'trying to get a bond with' (Firth 2008) and to 'hang out' with (eg Johnson, Douglas, Bigby & Iacono 2011 ; Forster 2008). The two perspectives are certainly not mutually exclusive and are equally fundamental to Intensive Interaction with an 8 or 68 year old. There is certainly no schism between using Intensive Interaction in a social context with an aged adult, or in a school with a child. The spark of energy might well be brighter and more obviously playful in an 8 year old than a 40 year old or a 68 year old, but the shared and thematic structure of the interaction would likely be the same. While the fidelity or 'what makes it Intensive Interaction' will still be apparent, the teacher would probably not see their primary role as supporting the 8 year old's 'quality of life', nor would the carer of a 68 year be necessarily focussed on being the fuel for sustained activity in the learner's zone of proximal learning.

The identity of Intensive Interaction across settings lies in the principle that the practitioner follows the learner along their individual learning path, supporting their discovery and exploration of the deep structures that underpin communication and social learning, without advancing an agenda. 'The learning gradually emerges over time as a result of the rolling, cumulative, generative process of frequent regular and repetitive actions of Intensive Interaction' (Hewett 2012).

Where is it used?

Although Intensive Interaction was developed in special education settings in UK, it *continued page 10*

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has achieved recognition among services for adults with complex intellectual and often multiple intellectual disabilities (see eg Lovell, Jones & Ephraim, 1998; Elgie & Maguire, 2001; Firth, Elford, Leeming & Crabbe, 2008; Samuel, Nind, Volans & Scriven, 2008) and for people with autism (Jones & Howley 2010) and more recently for people with dementia (Harris & Wolverson, 2014). In their survey of approaches to supporting clients with the most complex needs, Goldbart and Caton (2010) noted that 85% of Speech Pathologists responding to the survey reported as using Intensive Interaction.

In Australia, Intensive Interaction is recognised as an evidence based practice by Australian Psychology Society, (2011). Bayside Special Developmental School (SDS) in Moorabbin, Victoria is recognised as Australia's 'Centre of Excellence' in the approach. All of the staff in the school have been involved in professional development in the approach and many take advantage of the constant rolling program of in-house training which increasingly involves collaboration with other schools in Victoria and clusters of schools in Queensland. The school provides professional development and support to parents, teachers, support staff and therapists from schools around Australia and New Zealand and increasingly to residential and day services for adults with complex needs.

Video evidence plays a central place in the practice of Intensive Interaction in schools and services that have received training in the approach. As the video accumulates, it provides a data resource which is used to track students' and clients' learning across the year. Video is also used by teaching and care teams as the basis of professional development activities including peer coaching and reflective practices (Barber 2007; 2011; 2012). To ensure that their practice is always 'best', Bayside SDS and a cluster of special schools in Queensland have recently begun to exchange and view each other's video samples, to view them without knowledge of the other's decisions about what judgements have been made about them, to 'moderate' each other's

conclusions about how much learning is apparent in video footage. This process ensures that the descriptions of learning and progress that schools provide to parents are accurate and well founded, as well as calibrating the judgements that the staff make.

If you would like to see Intensive Interaction in practice, Bayside SDS have uploaded a series of videos:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_lS63D0jQUg

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u_6az9D3bCc

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnEtQTiqlEk>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IWF0vA8NRVs>

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_eqHIJEgknw

For further information ...

www.drmarkbarber.co.uk

www.intensiveinteraction.org

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