

Creating cultures of Intensive Interaction in Australasian Special Schools

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This article gives a brief overview of an approach to working with students who experience profound intellectual and multiple disabilities [PIMD] which is attracting the attention of an increasing number of special educators as well as adult services¹ in Australia and New Zealand. There is also an outline of measures used in a small number of schools to promote cultures of professional reflection and discussion, which is contributing to improved learning outcomes for this challenging group of learners

Intensive Interaction was developed in UK in the 1980's as an approach to working with learners of all ages, who are at the very earliest stages of communication, and those who might be described as 'hard to reach'. The approach is used with learners, who are not communicating with intent; who take no meaning from symbols, signs, words or any other formal method of communication, many of whom spend prolonged periods of time involved in repetitive or self oriented cycles of behaviour.

Since the first publication of 'Access to Communication' by Dr Dave Hewett and Dr Melanie Nind, a growing number of books and peer reviewed research articles on the use of the approach have contributed to developing a breadth of insight into the effectiveness of the approach [eg Nind ;1996, Nind & Hewett 1994; 2001; 2006, Nind & Powell;1996, Kellett & Nind;2003, Barber;2007]

The aims of Intensive Interaction include to develop

- q cognitive abilities including *social cause and effect* and *predicting and exploring* the behaviour of others
- q fundamental communication abilities including eye contact, facial expression, turn taking and engagement
- q *sociability*, including the desire and ability to be with others, *taking part in and initiating* social contact and *understanding the ways in which social encounters can be enjoyable*

Intensive Interaction is characterized as a naturalistic approach to promoting communication which focuses the practitioners' attention on what the learner can do rather than on perceived deficits. It is not a behavioural intervention, rather it seeks to promote communication rather than decreasing targeted behaviours. As one of what have become known as the 'Interactive Approaches' [Collis & Lacey 1996], Intensive Interaction focusses on the understanding that 'the quality of a learner's attention is substantially greater when focussed on events of their own choosing, than to events chosen by someone else'. [Warren & Yoder 1998]

'Intensive Interaction is an approach that uses behaviours the learner will recognise as their own to develop a two way dialogue, through which fundamental communication skills and enjoyment of social interaction can be learnt.

In essence, the approach harnesses features which are seen as crucial and inherent in the interactions between care givers and typically developing infants, although it recognises that the learner has the experience and established preferences which are associated with more mature learners. It emphasizes the importance of learning about being a communicative 'agent' and

¹ Because of the range of staff who use this approach [eg teachers, classroom support workers and assistants, therapists, workers in adult services etc], the term 'practitioner' will be used throughout this article.

proposes a style of interactive teaching based on the skilled partner taking the lead from the learner, rather than the learner being led by the skilled partner. One of the tenants of the approach is that no matter how idiosyncratic the behaviour, it needs to be interpreted ... as having potential for interaction' Nind & Powell; [2000]

Beginning

An initial period of observation is used to identify the student's preferred sensory focuses and attentional inclinations. These observations become the reference point for practitioners' initial attempts to engage the learner's attention . Where learners are routinely focussed on repetitive, self oriented or ritualistic behaviours, the practitioner might join in with them Alternately the practitioner might 'suggest' an interaction to a sentient learner, based on characteristic mannerisms, movements or sounds which were noted during their observations. Once the learner's attention is engaged, the practitioner uses a palette of non-directive responses or intrigues to support an open ended interaction.

As interactions progress, the learner begins to experiment with a range of contributions to investigate the responsiveness or apparent rules of the game. The practitioner responds using 'topics' or 'conversational openers' closely related to what the learner does, to open up communicative possibilities for the learner to explore, if they so choose. In this way communicative routes [eg turn taking, reciprocity, anticipation, imitation, social prediction] are investigated allowing mutually responsive dialogues to evolve in within the repertoires or the ' sensory language' that the learner recognises as their own.

Within conventional teaching approaches for many learners with severe-profound intellectual disabilities and autistic spectrum disorders, or who experience PIMD, much of their experience of communication involves responding to directions, or requests for compliance in one form or another. Many teachers report that the majority of their interactions with high needs learners involve them in responses to [their interpretations of] student expressions of needs, and communicative exchanges which might be generalised as functional and finite.

Intensive Interaction opens up the communicative arenas of joint attention and social interaction, which while being acknowledged to be of equal importance to the development of communication as the more universally addressed 'request' function [eg Bruner;1981 , Bates; 1979] are all too frequently absent in classroom interventions [Light, Parsons & Dragar 2001]

Challenges in School Contexts

Profound levels of intellectual disability catastrophically disrupt the learners understanding of the events they are experiencing. This often occurs to the point where the learner demonstrates insurmountable difficulty in achieving, what are for typically developing learners, the most automatic intellectual separations: For many learners, separating the presence of their teacher from the other competing, ambient and pervasive sensory events which simultaneously compete for their attention, is an overwhelming challenge . Unless the activity or sensory focus is already 'coded' or recognized by the learner, the vast majority of conventional teaching activities, or indeed group lessons, become apparently random sequences of confusing experiences for the learner. Indeed it could be said that for the many learners who have few means of challenging, controlling or changing the experience, they frequently freefall through the events of the lesson as they engulf them. Learners with these complex and interacting disabilities do not necessarily learn what is being taught, but acquire further experience of passive recieience and learned helplessness as they are physically prompted through tasks whose purpose is obscure and all too often totally unrelated to their perception of the world. At these levels of learning, both selecting 'meaningful learning outcomes' from an arbitrary hierarchy of skills, as well as measuring performances with a 'criterion of success' might be judged as somewhat unrealistic.

The challenge for special educators using Intensive Interaction is to reconcile the perceived tensions between the dominant culture in Australasia, of prescriptive and predictive objectives led curricula, with a learner centred style of teaching and promoting communicative involvement.

It is certainly not controversial to state that for learners with PIMD there are no existing standardised tests [which] are available for a valid estimation of their intellectual capacity [IASSID]. Neither is it controversial to suggest that for many of these learners, their presence on curriculum hierarchies is frequently based on their physical presence in the activity rather than their active involvement in it.

The first hurdle to be overcome relates to the practice of writing predictive targets for pre-intentional learners. This culture leads us to frame our strategies on the basis of what we want rather than how the learner senses and perceives their world. [Collis & Lacey XX] Indeed it could be argued that objectives which make specific behavioural predictions about the learning progress of a student whose interactions with the environment are at a preintentional level, are largely 'wish-lists'. While meaningful progress can be monitored and recorded, it cannot be predicted, and while 'drilling' these learners through series of actions might produce increased compliance, or physical performance of patterns of action, it does not produce understanding, cognitive gains, or learning.

Intensive Interaction and other Interactive Approaches [Collis & Lacey 1996] present a rationale for teaching which challenges the dominant behaviourist culture which seeks to 'fix' perceived deficits. Although recognising the need for collecting evidence and rigor in teaching, the Interactive Approaches "re-orientate practitioner's attention from focusing on what (learners) cannot do, to giving them more control over what they can do

Professional Development in Intensive Interaction

Best practice in Intensive Interaction requires practitioner reflection and the recording of interactions. This section describes a process in development which has been reported more fully in Support for Learning [Barber 2007]

In an initiative at Bayside Special Developmental School, Moorabbin a culture of professional reflection and a process of group moderation of progress has been developing since 2004. More recently and following a period of training in Intensive Interaction, the initiative has spread to two schools in New Zealand in 2006; Arohanui School, Auckland and Patricia Avenue School, Hamilton and between St Annes Special School, St Patricks Special School and Kilparrin Services SA, in Adelaide.

The purpose of this initiative has been

1. to develop a culture of robust reporting on the communication development of learners with complex ID, by reaching inter-observer agreement about evidence of changes in levels of communicative involvement.
2. to provide an arena for teachers and support workers to reflect on their use of the particular communication skills developed through training in Intensive Interaction
3. to continue this development through professional collegiate practices.

1. Robust reporting

Video footage of students and practitioners involved in Intensive interaction is regularly filmed during the school year. This becomes a resource to enable robust professional discussion about progress or aspects of progress demonstrated by the student across the reporting period. The video can also be assembled as a digital portfolio or record of the learner's school life, for parents.

The initiative involves the formation of group of involved practitioners at each school. The group commits to meeting on a regular basis for discussion. At the beginning of the recording period a process of 'moderation' begins in order to establish the levels of communicative involvement that the learner demonstrates at the start of the year. This 'moderation' process follows a set format; A piece of video is shown of a learner and staff member engaged in an open ended, content free interaction, which follows the attentional lead of the learner [ie Intensive Interaction]. The footage is chosen by the staff team working closest with the learner. The convention is that the video shows what they believe illustrates the student 'at the top of their game'. Discussion takes place about the nature of the *involvement* that the learner demonstrates. The frame of reference used to make these statements is the document 'Framework for Recognizing Achievement' which underpins the "P" Levels in England's QCA '*Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties*' Discussion and eventual agreement allows the group to arrive at a descriptive statement based on the Framework's levels, which characterizes the student's level of communicative involvement.

This moderated statement describes is then used by the practitioner to write open ended goal statements describing the supportive contributions they currently make to interactions, the manner in which interactions typically take shape, and the types of settings [ie Curriculum Areas] in which interactions will occur.

Throughout the year, teachers record brief narrative notes on interactions, sketching out or describing new developments, contributions, emerging responses, the appearance of new initiations etc. as well as emerging trends in interactions. These notes contribute further evidence of process, but importantly inform the mid and end of year reporting process.

At the end of the reporting cycle, another recent video is shown, and the process is repeated. Progress across the year is agreed through comparison of video footage and the moderated statements. Evidence of progress is subjected to a robust discussion, occasionally requiring more video evidence to be collected. These discussions prove to be crucial for the development of a shared understanding of the process of communication and for developing a common language to describe the learning taking place. Central to the reporting process is the recognition that 'horizontal progress is just as important as vertical progress'.

Through collegiate practice and agreement, a much more robust level of reporting and recognition of progress is achieved than when conventional 'criterion of success' is used. No longer is the 'criterion of success' a matter for the opinion of a single practitioner, but it becomes an agreed position taken by a collegiate body or community of practitioners. More importantly however, this process does not attempt to report on the performance of a skill, rather on the involvement of a process.

2. Developing Professional Reflection.

The second part of the initiative involves staff coming together for a process of professional reflection and to get feedback from their peers about their own interactive skills. This process occurs in a bi-weekly rhythm of in-house professional development which has become an intrinsic part of the professional culture of the schools committed to developing their use of Intensive Interaction.

Using protocols adapted from the Australian National Schools Network, and the Intensive Interaction Reflection Tool [Williamson and Barber 2006 in Barber 2007] the video footage provides a resource for structured and collegiate reflection and discussion about the skills of practitioners. At specific meetings, staff select video showing themselves involved in an interactive encounter and invite discussion with their professional colleagues about features of the video they present. The format of the feedback and indeed the entire process is governed by the 'protocols' which seek to both support the presenter and ensure that all of the group contribute to the process. The

process results in a range of 'warm' and 'cool' feedback being given to the practitioner by their peers. The feedback is always given in a style which affirms good practice while facilitating further reflection and contributing to the continual process of improved pedagogy.

The establishment of these processes has contributed to a continual process of the development of our knowledge of Intensive Interaction, but it also regularly provides increased insights into the experience of consciousness of our students. This is of vital importance when assisting learners with these levels of intellectual disability, and those whose perceptions of the world are frequently disrupted by autistic spectrum disorders, to learn.

Both of these collegiate processes have the effect of opening the classroom door to collegiate learning for teachers whose practice has frequently been isolated from all but a small classroom team. They also promote professional support networks and a shared ownership of our educational endeavours. Professional dialogue and reflection processes have also been found to result in more consistent responses to individual students on an informal basis as encounters occur across the school campus. Most importantly however, students begin to notice that other people begin to 'speak their language'

Ultimately then, Intensive Interaction and the processes we have established to sustain it, advance improvement in student learning outcomes, facilitate improved understanding and contribute to improved quality of life.

NB A range of levels of training in Intensive Interaction is available at Bayside SDS Vic

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