

Notes from presentation by Trish Porter at 2011 conference "Exploring the Plateau"

Shared understanding Parents and Educators. Will Intensive Interaction lead to "real" communication?

Slide 1: Kai ora I'm Trish Porter. I'm from Oaklynn Special School. A School on Auckland NZ. I first attended a Mark Barber workshop in 2005. We started small and now Intensive Interaction is an integral part of our schools wider focus on quality interactions through the use of relationship approaches.

Slide: Parents asked the darndest questions, don't they? I was so happy with how our practice at Oaklynn was going with II. The teachers and teacher aides were all involved, the targets were all working well, the students were having some wonderful times. Then a parent asked me this question. I was stunned, taken aback, lost for words. Without doubt the parent had made me think. So I'm going to share with you my journey to answer the question. "Will Intensive Interaction lead to real communication?"

And to start with I'm going to use the analogy of a swimming pool. Hmmm.

Are pools just about swimming?

Is communication just about signs, gestures and words?

Lets stop; and look at a public pool and see the variety of action going on.

Slide 3: It's just an ordinary swimming pool, a deep end, a shallow end, nice spa off to the side, there's a diving board at one end. You've all been there before haven't you? In the shallows we can see a child jumping to his Mum's outstretched hands at the edge of the pool. The child **trusts** his Mum and is prepared to take the **risk** and benefit from the excitement of the activity. Just as the first step for us when connecting with a difficult to reach student is to build a level of trust. We create the opportunity for the student to explore a relationship. But that's not all

Slide 4: A Dad is splashing in the water with his son, no particular pattern just having **fun being together**, splashing together. They are very comfortable together. The young son knows that Dad will stop the game when he is ready and follow his lead to another game. At attention and response level We do exactly this with our students in an interaction. Our students respond in surprise and enjoyment. But that's not all

Slide 5: Firstly the boys are standing on the edge, pretending to jump in together. Neither wanting to be the one to go in first. They watch each other intently and each movement is scrutinised. We engage with our students and they sustain their looks to us and watch our movements. We have both become important.

The two boys effortlessly start playing a game of catch with a ball. One throws to the other, each waits in expectancy of their turn. When we participate with our students actions are sequenced and repeatedly signals are sent backwards and forwards.

Slide 6: At the spa pool an elderly couple are enjoying a soak and speak Cantonese to each other; two teenagers are signing to each other and two women are chatting. Even through these pairs of people can't understand each other they are effectively communicating using their individual communication system. We have ways of connecting with our students that someone on the outside of the relationship wouldn't recognize. We are involved with each other and we connect in a consistent meaningful way.

Slide 7: On the side of the pool is the teacher and students with special needs (they are not even in the water but on the side of the pool) doing kicking practice. They are not swimming and if they never get in the pool they never will be swimming no matter how good and strong their kicking on the side of the pool gets.

I recognize this teacher because it used to be me. Once I felt like the teacher on the side of the pool. Doing things that I thought looked like communication. Things like trying to get students with Profound Multiple Learning Disability (Australian – Profound Intellectual Multiple Disability) to exchange objects to request things we thought they might like. Either we couldn't get them to see the pattern pick up the object and place it in the hand of a person, even with a third person involved to prompt them or if they did manage an exchange it wouldn't generalise to other settings nor to extending to more than one object. They would lose one once another was introduced. It was a motor task they were complying with rather than communication. They weren't learning how communication worked just a motor skill that got them something they liked, it had nothing to do with people. The idea that you just had to do it often enough and in the same way all the time and that this was going to turn them into communicators now appears to me absurd. When they actually did do it, it was a bit like synchronised swimming. All fake smiles and scripted movements.

Slide 8: Then along came Intensive Interaction and it answered that niggle that what we were doing wasn't bringing about change. Here was a way to follow typical development of communication and it was fun.

Now I was in the pool using the strategies of Intensive Interaction. Initially I was feeling like I was treading water but once we were using the tools of student moderation and the adult protocol; I was really enjoying being with students, being flexible and feeling clear about where we were going and most importantly seeing change in students. Some students were becoming more demanding!! Heaven forbid. To see change in students that for years had made little progress was exciting. Here I was a happy little paddler.

Then I was asked by a parent "will doing Intensive interaction lead to real communication". I had hit my plateau which is our conference theme Exploring the plateau. I knew what we were doing was way better than our past attempts at getting students communicating but would it lead to symbolic communication as this was what was being asked with the reference to real communication.

What I saw when I looked at the pool was the enjoyment and joy of being with others, engaging and participating in sensory conversation. The parents were clearly looking at the people in the spa pool and saying what we want is communication that is unambiguous, communication that is clear to a wide variety of people.

It was a good question that made me have to think more of the bigger picture of where our parents want their children to get to. And if I can't answer the question with confidence and clearly then it makes me wonder are we doing enough; is there another strategy we should be following?

Slide 9: So I began to think about how to answer this question and thought of the students I work with. One of these is Jesse.

He is 11years old. He has been 'black blind' since birth and is developmentally delayed. His hearing has been compromised by bursting ear drums and problems with his middle ear. One drum has been repaired and this appears to be helping him to hear more. He also has epilepsies. His family is very supportive. We have been using the strategies of Intensive interaction with him for the last three years.

Slide 10: We last moderated Jesse at Participation level peaking into Involvement, but we aren't seeing a spontaneous movement to Jesse using unambiguous signs and gestures. We can however identify some situations where Jesse is communicating meaningfully.

A colleague shared with me insights from a recent course by Robert Owens where he talked about taking situations where the child is already making meaningful steps to communicate and stretching the symbolic level of the child's communication.

I decided to use the tool of Narrative Assessment to look more closely at the situations that Jesse was communicating meaningfully in.

Slide 11: Narrative Assessment is a tool being used in NZ . It is based on the Learning stories used in early childhood education developed by Margaret Carr. You take a situation and record verbatim what happened and then analyse the learning that has taken place. Narrative assessment also puts strings of stories together so that you can build up a more complex picture of the students learning over time. The web site www.throughdifferenteyes.org.nz gives good information about this assessment that you may find interesting.

So I recorded a situation on video where Jesse was communicating meaningfully and analysed it using Narrative Assessment. Here is a bit of that clip. Jesse is using his position in the room to indicate that he wants food.

Slide 12: (show video clip)There is a big draw back to using this position in the room strategy at home and school that his mum and we have observed; in that he will come and sit at the table at times to just enjoy being with others rather than as a request for food so it is very open to the correct interpretation by the adults around him.

I shared the Narrative assessments with the class team and they were very willing to looking at how they could try and extend this situation to be more symbolic but we still weren't sure of how to go about doing this. We decided to watch what the student did more closely. The staff saw that on one occasion the student had rubbed his tummy before coming to the table and he was really hungry as the class had just had swimming. So we tried to pattern this to him each time we went through the object cue and walking routines of coming to the table to eat. Unfortunately this wasn't the magic bullet the moved him to use this gesture. We were struggling with this. On reflection I realise we

had got out of the pool! We had fallen into the old way of thinking and were trying to impose a gesture on him and match his meaning to it. It wasn't going anywhere.

So how to get back in the pool? It got me thinking that really what I needed was to know in more detail the progression of the development of symbols .

Slide 13: Dr Stanley Greenspan has researched this area and his research put us right back in the pool. The beginning of symbol use is emotional signalling.

Greenspan's research highlighted what I described earlier in the pool

- Building trust /being in a rewarding relationship with high levels of emotion (high affect)
- Establishing 2 way communication – sending gestures/signals back and forth

And what Greenspan's research added was the level of competency that was required before the student could really understand how communication works.

The student requires a very high level of competency at sending signals back and forth- much higher than I had appreciated before.

Slide 14: When I think again about Jesse and reflect on the notes of past moderation sessions I realize that the years spent playing rough n tumble games have been building up his competency – in passing signals repeatedly back and forth. During these games he has learnt to stay with another person for a long time – getting over excited / calming down and staying connected. He has built up positive memories about games played so that there is always an “in” – a way to connect with him. He has learnt to solve problems, find ways to initiate interaction, reaching out with his leg to keep the other person in the game.

I now recognize the learning that has taken place. Jesse is thinking about his environment and taking an active role in his learning – he is seeing himself as separate from his environment and able to act on the people and objects in his environment to get outcomes he wants.

What I once thought of as a plateau – students doing the same games over and over I now look at differently.

This isn't stalled progress on a plateau , it is valuable and essential learning that is necessary for the student to develop competency at the level of passing signals back and forth.

I have also seen this pattern with other students in my school . Students who did years of practice passing signals back and forth before they have been able to move onto new games, follow games suggested by the adult. Years of practice thinking and problem solving being active participants and gradually contributing more and more to the sensory conversation.

So we need to stay active in the “pool” there are no short cuts.

Jesse has now begun to expand his topics of sensory conversation here is an example of vocal play.

This Next video clip is of Jesse 's vocal play game. Remember Jesse has no vision.

Slide 16: In this clip we saw Jesse getting enjoyment and pleasure from sharing space and sound with his teacher side, well aware of her and smiling.

Jesse is realizing that he can accommodate new ideas and new ways of playing games with people he enjoys being with.

Slide17: Our job is to keep recognizing, valuing and documenting the learning that Jesse is showing us, particularly in the areas of his competency skills at two way communication; recording activities and games he is developing a memory of; and the problems that he is solving. I think good ways to do this is through narrative assessment and recently Jesse's class teacher (Janet who is also at the conference here) has been able to get photos of Jesse showing a gesture that he uses to indicate what he wants to happen next in the game, a gesture dictionary

Slide 18: This is Jesse saying I want to play. We can invite him to play by bringing our hands up under his and taking them to the open hands position.

Slide 19: Jesse rocking back for the rock forward game. He shows his back and rocks back to the adult who then pushes him forward.

Slide 20: This is Jesse saying pull my legs over my head. He throws his legs up to the adult who takes them and pulls them over his head. He will repeatedly throw his legs up until the adult does it.

Slide 21: And finally the washing machine game or sometimes this is I want to jump . He pulls the adults hands up under his arm pits and locks them in.

Slide 22: We will continue to follow his lead and spend time with him so that he can build his understanding of how communication works; so he has a communication system. Where Jesse has communication skills that spontaneously generalise to new settings because it comes from him and is his system.

Slide 23: When a student is in an emotionally rewarding relationship they are learning how a communication system works – staying in the pool- staying in relationship is the best way forward.

Now I feel confident about saying yes Intensive Interaction is the best way to reach real communication. I don't know the level of unambiguous symbol use that Jesse will reach.

Whatever the level Jesse reaches

His relationships are real

His communication is real.