Intensive Interaction : some practical considerations

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Intensive Interaction is the name given to an approach to developing the ability and desire to communicate and participate in social interactions. The approach was developed and is primarily used with people who experience profound intellectual disabilities [PID], or who might be described as having a high dependency on the interpretation of others to make themselves understood; a level of awareness of their own intentions which is low, or difficult to determine; a level of comprehension which is low or difficult to determine. They may have very limited or inconsistent ways of communicating which frequently lead to an ambiguity of meaning and indeed, may have acquired a tendency to acquiesce to the suggestions of others and an inability to contradict [another's] interpretation [Grove,Bunning,Porter & Olsson;1999] The approach is also "used as a means of developing interaction skills in people who are typically very…. withdrawn or who spend large amounts of time in….ritualised, self oriented behaviours". [Goldbart 2005]

In spite of its origins being clearly stated [Nind & Hewett 1994] as derived from developmental perspectives on learning, Intensive Interaction is said to be firmly based in a 'normalisation' or social role valorisation set of values and beliefs [Nind & Kellett 2002], emphasising as it does, the central importance of valuing people for who they are.

The aims of Intensive Interaction
>   include to develop
>   o cognitive abilities including social cause and effect and predicting and exploring the behaviour of others
>
>   o 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
>
>   o fundamental communication abilities including eye contact, facial expression, turn taking and engagement

[Nind & Hewett 1994]

Intensive Interaction is not characterised by the delivery of a regime of techniques or of specific content, rather, it could be termed a 'naturalistic' approach. The manner in which practitioners guide their learner's emerging communication is largely informed by a number of principles that are derived from the analysis of nascent social interactions in typical development.

The key features of the approach include
- The creation of mutual pleasure and interactive games, being together with the purpose of enjoying each other
- The skilled partner adjusting her/his interpersonal behaviours [*ie gaze, voice, language use, body posture, facial expression*] in order to become engaging

1

- Interactions flowing in time with pauses, repetitions, and the skilled partner blending their responses to the mood and preferences of the learner
- The use of intentionality – the willingness to credit the learner with intentions ie responding to behaviours as if they were requests or indicators
- Contingent responding- ie following the learner's lead and handing over control of the activity

[Nind & Hewett 1994]

Observation

A good period of observation is of paramount importance in Intensive Interaction, as to be able to engage the learner on their own terms requires the practitioner to recognise the learner's preferred locations, ambiences and modes of sensory experience [ie movement, sound, cadences]. Observation should also identify which environmental events the learner orients to with interest as these may present valuable contexts for communicative exchanges. It is central to the practitioner's approach to be alert to opportunities that may arise that enable them to respond to and follow the learner, into coordinated joint attention or joint participation in a mutually acknowledged focus.

Observation should also identify any events or approaches that may be causes of anxiety or fear for the learner, so that they can be avoided.

The information collated in this period will be used to inform the practitioner's early attempts to engage the learner in initial exploratory encounters. Indeed the early work in Intensive Interaction involves developing a number of playfully ritualised routines that engage the learner. This is frequently most effectively accomplished by the practitioner assuming or reflecting some of the learner's characteristic behaviours. "We look for things that have meaning for the learner and using them, shift their attention from solitary space and activity to shared activity………we look at what they do and do it with them" [Caldwell 2002] Using behaviours or patterns of behaviour that the learner characteristically demonstrates, optimises the familiarity of the 'content' of the dialogue for the learner. This approach often apparently engages interest and curiosity when their own 'sensory language'[Caldwell 2002] is noticed occurring at a novel location. As Nind & Powell [1999] suggest, "practitioners should attempt to engage the [learner] with 'intrusions' that are within [their] existing behavioural repertoire or known pleasure"

Interaction

Once the practitioner has attracted the interest of the learner and has established some level of familiarity with and curiosity in their approach, the practitioner begins to explore the possibilities of engaging the learner in reactive dialogues, using features that the observation has suggested. It is central to these early interactions that the skilled partner demonstrates their intention to follow the learner's lead, effectively handing over control of the engagement and empowering the learner to control its duration and subject.

The practitioner continually monitors, reacts to and interprets the learner's reactions and behaviours to their presence, in a manner which demonstrates that the learner's actions have both predictable repercussions and social currency. Simply put, using Intensive Interaction, the skilled practitioner continually responds to the learner's

behaviours, in a fluent manner, which is individualised to meet the idiosyncrasies of the learner. In a sense, the practitioner envelopes the learner in a communicative context, so that no matter how the learner acts, the more skilled partner can shape their own response so that it facilitates a further opportunity for the learner to contribute. It is rather like a game of tennis between a novice player and a coach, where the supportive coach will always hit the ball back somewhere within the reach and comfortable stroke of the novice, wherever they are on the court.

While the choice of activities is controlled by the learner, the practitioner's role involves shaping the encounter to attract the attention of the learner to what might be described as 'interactive features' of the communicative process. Opportunities to engage in turn taking, bursting and pausing, imitation, anticipation and negotiation can be manipulated by the practitioner, so that although following their partner's choice of 'topic' [eg hand clapping, or vocal sounds] in a dialogue, the practitioner suggests communicative themes or directions. Mutual attention might be drawn to the introduction of 'anticipation' into a dialogue, by for example, the practitioner hesitating their contribution to an established burst-pause dialogue. This will disrupt the rhythm of the dialogue, and introduce a novelty or surprise that can be mutually recognized and revisited in later encounters. In a similar manner, hesitation at the end of 'build-up games' or 'frames', which lead the learner to expect a particular sequence of events, might be used to lead the learner into affectively signalling their expectation of the final element of the sequence. By acknowledging and acting on this affective response, the practitioner both draws attention to it, and underlines its communicative significance.

 As interactions evolve and become more established, and thus recognised, they become increasingly reciprocal, allowing the practitioner to hand over progressively more control to the learner.

Roles

The role of practitioner as 'respondent' rather than 'initiator' of social interactions frequently promotes tensions between practitioner's self image as a provider of knowledge and guidance, and the acknowledgement of the learner as a partner and decision maker. However it is certainly uncontroversial to concede 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 [eg Warren & Yoder 1998].

While it is a central tenant to the approach that the learner and their contribution are controlling influences within interactions, there is a practitioner agenda, but within Intensive Interaction, "it relates to a way of operating rather than a content to be delivered" [Nind & Powell 1999]. The practitioner is there to extend the situation's communicative potential through rich interpretation and empower the learner to explore communicative interactions

Techniques

It was stated earlier that this approach is not characterised by the delivery of specific techniques. However, interaction with learners whose perceptions of environmental responses may be impaired, distorted, disrupted or oriented to

Conventional intervention and Intensive Interaction...........what is so different?

What is different?
- Conventional interventions typically begin by assessing the learner to identify what skills are problematic, or which areas of the learner's performance [as assessed against a checklist or curriculum] indicate intervention
- **Using Intensive Interaction, observation is aimed at identifying strengths and preferences, so that these become the contexts for communicative encounters.**

What is different?
- Conventional styles of intervention and teaching are characterised by the teacher or therapist deciding on a predicted outcome or objective
- **Intensive Interaction is characterised as open ended – the outcome of encounter is not predicted or 'driven' towards**

What is different?
- The practitioner conventionally leads & controls, or drives the interaction : engaging the learner in a [planned] teaching session
- **Using Intensive Interaction the practitioner makes themselves available for social activity.**
- **The activity or focus of the practitioner is not dominant.**
- **Termination of the interaction is under the learners control**

What is different?
- The teacher/practitioner/ therapist usually leads by providing the focus or interest, attracting learner's attention into joint focus [usually an object]
- **Using Intensive Interaction the practitioner looks for and *responds to* the learner's focus of interest by demonstratively joining in with it**

What is different?
- Conventionally, the practitioner/teacher/therapist has control over place, subject and reward associated with experience
- **Using Intensive Interaction these depend on the preferences of learner**

What is different?
- Stereotyped, self involved, or ritually organised behaviours are conventionally considered 'inappropriate', they are frequently the focus of intervention aimed at extinction
- **Using Intensive Interaction these patterns of behaviour are seen as important, frequently indications of interest, that are significant to the learner**

What is different?
- Teaching and therapy interventions frequently focus on teaching new skills or protocols
- **Using Intensive Interaction practitioners should attempt to engage the learner with 'intrusions' that are within their *existing* behavioural repertoire or known pleasure, [Nind & Powell 1999] horizontal progression *across* contexts is as valuable as vertical progression along hierarchies**

internal focuses that are not within the practitioners influence, requires the guiding partner to rethink their palette of responses to draw the learner's attention to their presence in the interaction.

Within an interaction, no matter how idiosyncratic the behaviour, Caldwell [eg 2003] advises, it needs to be interpreted as part of who the learner is and as having potential for interaction. However, it is also stressed that the learner doesn't set the whole agenda regardless of the practitioner – the approach is one of mutuality and interaction. Successful practitioners of intensive interaction manage to combine "spontaneous responding with extreme sensitivity to the idiosyncratic needs and behaviours of the learner, while intellectualizing the developmental principles being applied" [Hewett & Nind 1998]. This enables what Caldwell [2003], describes as 'a wandering state of mutual response' to develop "......active in the sense of awareness and response, but passive in the sense of floating rather than swimming."

Simply responding by imitation, or with repeated turn taking can over time lead to the emergence of loops of activity, where the practitioner's contribution can become assimilated into the cycle of a closed stereotype, rather than maintaining a communicative balance. This can usually be avoided by the introduction of new, slight variations of the familiar behavioural features that the learner favors, into the exchange. This imbalance might also be avoided by some level of environmental manipulation, eg by the practitioner prominently placing of a significant or favoured object close by.

There is a lot of useful information available on ideas that practitioners might use to engage mutual participation in an interaction[eg Caldwell 1998; 2003, Nind & Hewett;2001]. These include for example 'echoing' a behaviour, where the practitioner responds using the nature or timbre of a behaviour, in a sensory mode other than the one the learner is using; for example tapping out the rhythm of the learner's vocal sounds, on a part of their body where they accept touch. Practitioners might adjust this to 'reflect' the pauses *between* their partner's behaviours, if they feel that their echo-ed contribution is being absorbed into a stereotypic loop of sensation.

Recording

It is the issue of recording and prediction of progress that frequently causes the most tension among practitioners. This is especially so for those working in educational settings, where the effectiveness of an approach is often measured in terms of linear progression along hierarchies of cognitive or behavioural checklists. However, it can also be argued that horizontal progress, or the demonstration of understanding or strategies across more varied applications, is equally valid [eg QCA Guidelines 1999].

Recording progress presents many difficulties. It is always easier and certainly more tempting to record the demonstration of performed skills or 'content' than to measure a learner's involvement in the more important arena of 'process'. However it is important to record interactions, to enable team approaches to develop, as well as to ensure that the important features of a previous encounter with a particular learner are more likely to be remembered for the next exchange.

While conventional recording tends to be dominated by ideas of recording achievement or skill application; noting the learner's level of involvement may present a more meaningful method for describing and recording progress, especially in the context of Intensive Interaction. 'The Framework for Recognising Attainment'

[Marvin C 1998] which underpins the 'P-levels' or ' Performance Descriptors' that structure the Qualification and Curriculum Authority's [QCA] Nation Curriculum Document 'Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties,' presents an excellent model for this purpose.   The hierarchy describes a progression in the manner in which the emerging involvement of the learner in communicative experiences might be marked:

Encounter
Pupils are present during an experience or activity without any obvious learning outcome, although for some pupils, *for example, those who withhold their attention or their presence from many situations*, their willingness to tolerate a shared activity may, in itself, be significant.

Awareness
Pupils appear to show awareness that something has happened and notice, fleetingly focus on or attend to an object, event or person, *for example, by briefly interrupting a pattern of self-absorbed movement or vocalisation.*

Attention and response
Pupils attend and begin to respond, often not consistently, to what is happening, *for example, by showing signs of surprise, enjoyment, frustration or dissatisfaction*, demonstrating the beginning of an ability to distinguish between different people, objects, events and places.

Engagement
Pupils show more consistent attention to, and can tell the difference between, specific events in their surroundings, *for example, by focused looking or listening; turning to locate objects, events or people; following moving objects and events through movements of their eyes, head or other body parts.*

Participation
Pupils engage in sharing, taking turns and the anticipation of familiar sequences of events, *for example, by smiling, vocalising or showing other signs of excitement*, although these responses may be supported by staff or other pupils.

Involvement
Pupils actively strive to reach out, join in or comment in some way on the activity itself or on the actions or responses of the other pupils, *for example, by making exploratory hand and arm movements, seeking eye contact with staff or other pupils, or by speaking, signing or gesturing.*

Gaining skills
Pupils gain, strengthen or make general use of their skills, and understanding knowledge, concepts or understanding that relate to their experience of the curriculum, *for example, they can recognize the features of an object and understand its relevance, significance and use.*

'Planning, teaching and assessing the curriculum for pupils with learning difficulties' General Guidelines Qualification and Curriculum Authority [1999].

The descriptors used in Firth's [2004] framework, used in adult services in Northern England, have been subsequently distilled from the originals [shown above] for brevity, but retain the spirit, if not the word of the framework used by the QCA document;

Encounter: The student or client is present during an interactive episode, but without any obvious awareness of its progression: *e.g. a willingness to tolerate a shared social atmosphere is sufficient*

Awareness: The student or client appears to notice, or fleetingly focus on an event or person involved in the interactive episode *e.g. by briefly interrupting a pattern of self-absorbed behaviour, movement or vocalisation*

Attention and Response: The student or client begins to respond (although not consistently) to what is happening in an interactive episode *e.g. by showing signs of surprise, enjoyment, frustration or dissatisfaction*

Engagement: The student or client shows consistent attention to an interactive episode presented to them: *e.g. by sustained looking or listening, or repeatedly following events with movements of their eyes, head or other body parts*

Participation: The student or client engages in sharing or taking turns in a sequence of events during an interactive episode: *e.g. by sequencing their actions with another person, or by passing signals repeatedly back and forth*

Involvement: The student or client makes active efforts to reach out, consistently join in, or even comment in some way on the interaction: *e.g. by sequencing their actions __and__ signing, vocalising or gesturing in some consistent and meaningful way*

Student/client Initiated Interaction: The student or client independently starts an activity (that cannot be described as repetitive or self-absorbed behaviour) and engages another person in the activity with social intent.

[Firth 2004]

While the framework does not address the notion of predicting progress, it is quite possible, using the template shown below, to record an impression of the involvement that the learner demonstrates and over time, to trace its progression as the subsequent interactions occur.

Following an encounter, practitioners record their impression of the 'peak' or most significant phase of the interaction, using the 'best fit' framework descriptions indicated in the framework, along with a short description of both the context and the learner initiated contribution that resulted in this impression [see diagram 1].

This framework is currently being used at Bayside Special Developmental School in Moorabin, Victoria, where it has proved useful to video interactions between staff and students so that moderation can be achieved within in-house recording among involved staff. This enables improved levels of reliability to be achieved across the school, as well promoting staff training in analyzing their interactive effectiveness, how they might progress and a recognition of the processes being encouraged in the interactions. Considering our interactions in this way is providing invaluable insights into pupil communication and it is also developing a more flexible palette of staff responses. Most importantly is the increase in practitioner awareness of the manner in which learners can be assisted to explore communication and empowered to control interactions.

	Pupil's name	

Date __/____/___ time____:___ venue your initials					
Encounter	Awareness	Attention & Response	Engagement	Participation	Involvement
☐	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Brief Description

Pupil initiated interactions

Terminations : pupil non-responsive / avoided / rejected [circle as appropriate]

Progress

Investigation of Intensive Interaction has so far been largely dominated by small studies, carried out by practitioners in service settings, e.g. Elgie & Maguire, 2001; Fisher & Watson, 1997; Irvine, 2001; Kellett, 2003). Indeed it is practitioner experience in a range of settings that is generating the progressively growing interest in the approach. While there is a growing body of publications making reference to and discussing its use, there are a number of confounding issues to deal with, not least of which is to arrive at a definition of what meaningful 'progress' actually is for learners with this level and complexity of intellectual disability. Debate is also needed to decide on the most useful focus for more structured investigation; eg whether it is the learner's communication which progresses, or the practitioners observation skills which become more sensitive and attuned to the learner. However, because of the variety of disabilities associated with these learners, and the implications of multiple disabilities interacting with each other, this population are renowned as being difficult to standardize or homogenize into the uniform groups necessary for large scale study.

Whether in educational or adult settings, the long term aims of practitioner's efforts with their clients are the same; improved quality of life. Adopting Intensive Interaction may or may not prove to be advantageous in terms of measurable skill acquisition over other approaches but it does not aim to be. Neither does it attract

the financial backing of associated with other approaches that purport to generate measurable progress in learners with complex intellectual disabilities. Intensive Interaction is centrally a values driven approach. Adopting it leads the practitioner to realign their perception of intellectual disability from one of a learning deficit, to that of a range of potentials and opportunities: The learner is valued for who they are, rather than for who they can be trained to be.

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