

The Hirstwood



Training

Communication

Course Tutor

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Communication is a basic need. Without it life has less meaning. Individuals with limited communication skills have less control over their environment, their bodies and their life. They can be disempowered. The Multi Sensory Room is a tool, which can be used in the process of the development of language and communication. Like all tools it can be utilised effectively or ineffectively. The aim of this paper is to show how and why the Multi Sensory Room can be used to this end.

We first of all need to consider the definitions of communication. Here are two, which always give me food for thought.

“The responses which the child or adult makes intentionally or unintentionally in order to affect the behaviour of another person, with the expectation that another person will receive and act on the message” Kiernan, Reid and Goldbart, (1987)
Foundations of Communication and Language, Manchester University Press.

“Communication is the exchange of ideas by any means possible”
H. Bradley

Communication the interaction of one human being with another and we need to communicate to gain quality of life. A sender, a code and a receiver are needed, it is always two way and it is always full time.

We communicate in many different ways, eye contact, body Language (Posture and gesture), tactile (Physical Contact, Objective Reference) informal gesture (natural Gesture), formal gesture (sign Symbols, Makaton Etc) symbols, writing and even photographic representation. We often feel our mode of communicating is verbal, but communication is not restricted to one code. We will often talk to another person but also include gesture to reinforce our information. When receiving messages we do not use these senses in isolation we are multi modal. We use our vision, hearing, touch, taste and smell to diagnose and analyse the meaning and manner of the message received. For example a stern look whilst your name is called in a forceful voice communicates a different message to a smile and a soft voice with the same verbal message.

Language is the ability to understand and to use symbols, typically verbal symbols, in thinking and communication. A symbol is a representation of something else, such as the picture of an apple representing the idea of an ‘apple.’ In the same way, the word ‘apple’ is a symbol. The ability to speak is an aspect of language, which is less important than the ability to understand the symbols and to internalise them in thought processes. Communication is the ability of the individual to convey his or her ideas and thoughts effectively and spontaneously through whichever means possible. Immediately we are considering means of communication other than speech.

To understand how an individual's communication skill can be developed, we must first look at the pre-requisites and stages of language development and reasons for communicating. These must be assessed for each individual so that the skills we are trying to develop in the MSR are clearly identified before we enter the room.

Prerequisites of language development.

1. Concept formation.

This begins with the idea of permanence of objects (Piaget 1954.) The individual must have something in their understanding for the symbol to represent, which is constant, even when the object is not present. Meaningful language is only possible when this early concept formation has been developed. We may have a symbol for a bubble tube on a switch but the person will need to understand that the symbol is a representation of the bubble tube.

2. Situational understanding.

This understanding of a regularly occurring sequence of events, which is limited to this context only. 'It is time for a bath now': the individual will understand the sequence of events following this statement, but not be able to attach meaning to the individual words. The words have not yet been internalised as symbols.

3. Symbolic understanding.

This includes the development of object recognition; understanding of increasingly arbitrary symbols e.g. a gesture representing an object and the ability to match one symbol to another e.g. matching a bubble tube to the picture.

4. Verbal Comprehension.

The development of the ability to understand the meaning held in a pattern of verbal symbols. This includes the ability to understand verbal labels; to relate two named objects; to match a symbol to a symbol and to select objects by use. The understanding of longer, more complex directions which may include size, colour and position is gradually developed. However, the ability to process information in this way is important for other forms of stimuli as well as for linguistic information.

5. Expressive language.

These mirror the development of understanding but occur later.

6. Development of the use of language.

Expressive language fills an increasingly significant intellectual function, which enables at first the directing and integrating of practical activities and later becomes a vehicle for thought.

(From Cooper, Moodley and Reynell 1978.)

This ordered pattern of development is seen typically in 'normal' students. It must be said, however that I have yet to meet a 'normal' student and often there are other barriers to language and communication in the individuals that we are most likely to meet in the multi sensory room.

Kiernan (1982) argues that sufficient skill level in the following areas are required for the development of language and communication: hearing; vision; motor skills; processing skills; social interaction skills and the motivation and opportunity to communicate which is relevant to the situation.

There are many splinter skills required for language development. To 'communicate' assumes the individual has internalised language as a vehicle for thought. This could be to a greater or lesser extent and could therefore be indicated by the assessment of current communication skills.

Early concept formation (Piaget 1954) may be beyond the comprehension of some of our students. Early stimulation is important to help a student to begin to interpret an object. As Kiernan (1982) argues the student must have the preparatory skills to begin communicating. Although many of our students will have a degree of sensory deficit in one or more of the senses, this does not mean that the student is non-communicating and is not aware of the environment around. The signals we witness may be different and slight.

Regardless of age stimulation of all the senses may need to be undertaken. This work for staff is often monotonous and repetitious even with the fascinating tools the MSR has too offer. Little progress may be observed without assessment and sufficient indications that the student is progressing. We may need to look for the slightest changes in behaviour to collect enough information to convince us that the student is responding. However the MSR will be a salutary tool to conduct this type of work.

There are such variances the room has to offer. Bright lights, dim lights, soft music, loud music etc. The room is a studio, which has an infinite number of possibilities, so preferences may be noted and used. The positioning of the client will be important. For example a person with macular degeneration or peripheral vision may need to be positioned to the side of a bubble tube to be able to see the effect at its best. When undertaking stimulation in the room we must be careful not to bombard the student, often one tool (e.g. Projector) will be enough as many of the tools are multi modal in their own right.

If we refer to the prerequisites of Communication. Based on Kiernan (1982) it is explained that 'In order to communicate and/or to learn to use language the individual must have':

A. Adequate hearing and vision.

We need to know to what extent the student or adult can hear and see. Disabilities profoundly hamper a student's responses, especially communicative responses. Assessment in the multi sensory room, can lead to training of sensory skills: enjoyment, visual location, discrimination, tracking, scanning, perceiving, visual memory, visual attention, recall and preference.

We sit a person in front of a bubble tube or projector, what is happening? The bubble tube offers visual, sound and tactile stimulation and so does the projector when used in an imaginative manner. We may encounter an increased awareness to the effect over a period of time. We may even find that the student exhibits a preference to the bubble tube over the other stimulus in the room. When we have found the preferred stimulus we can then utilise its influence to stimulate the senses. As I have said before stimulation takes time, often with little rewards but it is an essential pre requisite to communication.

B. Motor Abilities.

The effects in the room may also encourage body co-ordination such as hand eye co-ordination. The stimulus of the lighting and sound may elicit and refine motor movements, which could be a stepping-stone to the ability to gesture or sign. Touching the fibre optics will not only encourage body co-ordination but it will also help students understanding of cause and effect. We may then move on to the introduction of a switching system, which will allow the student to control the effect as well as having an effect on their motor abilities.

The stimulus may help mouth control to form speech sounds for example using sound activated switches may encourage vocalisations to stimulate appropriate mouth movements. Comfortable mats may assist in developing spatial and body awareness.

C. Processing skills.

The ability to remember can be predetermined by a student reselecting preferences. If a student goes to the same tool (e.g. the bubble tube) in each session then they are demonstrating processing skills. We will also need to assess the ability to attach meaning and the ability to sequence. The ability to sequence plays an important role in communication. Doing the same sequence of actions and events when going into the room may reinforce sequencing skills. We may also use the same effect wheel on the projector to encourage pre-empting. Multiple switch training developing recall could help. Using a dummy switch and a real switch could promote choice and so processing skills. Listening to the same music each time you use the room will help reinforce a series of events, which is going to happen.

D) Communication and conversation skills.

The knowledge that a student's action can affect the behaviour of other people in specific ways must begin with an understanding that the student can control appropriate situations. Responding to a student's communication will reinforce this. Again switches can be a good asset for this type of work. Turn taking with either the tutor or another student with either a tool or switch could help to reinforce turn taking. Appropriate social response. Contingency awareness. Cause and effect training with switches. Close contact with people and consistent responses. Mutual sharing of experiences so the carer does not overpower the client.

E) Something to say.

To communicate the individual must have needs and preferences. From the wide range of equipment available one can look for something the individual likes i.e. Types of music, tactile experiences, vibration, particular lights etc and can then control the stimuli to develop a situation where the individual has experience of communicative intent.

F) Reasons for communication.

The individual must want something in the environment or must want to interact with someone. Multi sensory rooms provide a positive and beneficial environment in which many individuals will find something they want. A calm ambience may also provide a background for more positive social interaction so that individuals will be further encouraged to interact.

G) Means of communication.

The individual must have a system to communicate with. Which is effective and pertinent to the situation that he is in. So many times we will hear that statement! "She is non communicating". A more realistic statement may be "we do not understand her mode of communication". We all communicate, but we must be given appropriate tools to communicate with. Tools, which another person can understand. In the MSR a person may be using objects of reference or signs to make choices and express needs. However if the receiver does not understand the mode of communication then the sender will not receive the appropriate response to the message. When working with early skills we will need to note even slight changes in posture or eye movement, which may indicate communication. As stated before communication is not always intentional.

When using the MSR categorise the skill areas that you wish to develop i.e. vision, hearing, motor skills, turn taking, motivation to communicate, opportunity to communicate or giving enough choices within the persons vocabulary to initiate events within the M.S.R.

Taking each skill to develop in turn, decide how the M.S.R will enable you to do this in the most effective and fun way possible.

An example follows: John is a young man with cerebral palsy. He is mobile, has no speech and frequently has major “frustration outbursts”. His understanding is limited to daily routines and activities although he is sensitive to the moods and feelings of others. His basic needs are made known through different Vocalisation or agitation. His understanding of basic forthcoming events is encouraged by a total communication approach i.e. he is given a cup shortly before going for his morning drink but as yet he has not used this system to express his needs. The total communication approach relates only to his most basic bodily needs. He shows little motivation to communicate. His visual abilities are poor, as are auditory skills. He does not turn take. His hand function is poor. The opportunity for John to experience a M.S.R has just arisen. How would you use this facility to improve John’s communication?

SOME OF THE AREAS IN JOHN’S COMMUNICATION THAT NEED ADDRESSING ARE:

1. Reduction in frustration
2. Extension of total communication approach to include M.S.R. (just going there) and key people within it
3. Development of a way for John to indicate his preferences in the M.S.R i.e. by touch.
4. Development of visual and auditory skills.
5. Development of communicative intent i.e. a reason to communicate!

There is no doubt that the rooms will offer for some people a relaxing place to escape the pressures of everyday life and demands. This can offer staff including the speech and language therapist, the opportunity to communicate and assess on the hear and now principle. Discussion through whatever means about the bubble tube or projector may help establish first of all the principle communication modes of the client and then the aims. It may help establish these in terms of the expansion of the person’s vocabulary or even the next communication mode to move on to. For example from informal gesture too more formal gesture and formal signing like Makaton or object referencing.

The Multi Sensory Room is an area where these sensory experiences can be highlighted and offered within a client’s field of communication! We can have the room bright or dark the visual effects can be close, far away, bright, dim, large or small. Sound effects loud, soft, close from the left or right they may offer a beat they may be high frequency or low, the variations are endless.

Cause and effect

For children and adults to make use of these ‘everyday items’ an understanding of cause and effect is essential. It is also essential when we are thinking about communication. If we call somebody’s name we expect them to respond, this is cause and effect.

The most obvious cause and effect scenario in the Multi Sensory Room is the relationship and communication between two or more people. With more

profoundly disabled people this may take place at a level of intellect our minds have passed at an early age and may include actions and events, which unless assessed closely may not be noticed. A person's reaction to another may be different in the room; the client may become more dependent on the companion because they find the environment threatening or strange. The client may become more independent of the person because they want to explore the room. Cause and effect is not just about switching switches to make things happen it is about touching people, prompting actions, exploration and investigation. The understanding of cause and effect may at first be gained in a way we would not even contemplate like touching a strange surface and feeling the difference. The reaction may be hard to detect but the client may be recognise the effect by their action of investigation and touch. This work is going to be slow but repetition will be important here. Touching a bubble tube is an action, which involves cause and effect. You touch the tube and feel it vibrates. To some this action is part of our in built investigative nature but its cause and effect.

For example a complex or basic switching system can be used to help a person understand the link between their action and the result. You may first of all start by using a single switch, then move on to using a switch or switches with symbols on them. This will help at many levels. First of all an understanding of cause and effect, an understanding of the choice a switch can offer. You may then use a symbol on the switch, I often show symbols created on a Braille copier, which adds tactile clues to the switch. Put these skills together and the client may gain the knowledge that the switch, will switch on the bubble tube! This is giving people control as well as a pre requisite to communication it could be seen as a pre-requisite to life skills such as operating lights and radios in the world outside the room!

Also think about the other steps in the communication ladder.

Sequencing skills again are important. Where do we use sequencing? Well think about it. Just as we as children learned to predict situations having done it time after time. A child of 3 years old may have a favourite book. They will know the words written in the book and show an uncanny ability to 'read' the book from cover to cover. Most children of three years old do not read the letters and words, but have learned the sequence of the pages. The picture on the page will give the pictorial clue to the words on the page and the child will appear to read the words. However the words are not being read. The sequence of the pages gives the child the information needed to remember the word you read in the book. The child has learned the sequence. So the MSR can help all ages gain sequencing skills. Like stimulation work-sequencing training can be repetitive for the staff. The same old underwater wheel on the projector will become boring for us. But for a client it will be a familiar image and the sequence of the images may be memorised as the wheel rotates. The sequence of colours on a fibre optic harness may be learned and then predicted by the client.

Turn taking is an important part of cause and effect this may be accomplished with switching systems. You have a switch and the client has a switch and you take it in turns to operate equipment in the room. But you do not need a switching system in your room to achieve this. Taking turns to guess the colours of the fibre optics or bubble tubes are all good reinforcement for this skill. Turn taking can be a part of theme work. You may have themed your multi sensory room and clients may be encouraged to take part in the theme. Your theme may be designed to encourage clients to take part in the theme. It's John turn to switch on the bubble tube and now its Susan's turn to make the sounds of the sea.

Signs You can make wheels for projectors, which contain symbols, or pictorial or photographic representations. You may be working with clients encouraging conversation through signs. Signs are often taught through cards, books and gesture. However another way may be to make a wheel with symbols. The client may be asked to match the symbols with a series of symbol cards in front of him or to tell you when the sign for a particular object appears. For example a numbers wheel could be used. Lay out the number cards on the floor in front of the client and she may touch the corresponding number card as the number appears on the projector. Or give 4 or 5 clients the number 1 to 10 and when your number appears you must touch your number.

There are also very important pre-requisites for the staff in the MSR as well as the clients. The staff must have a good working knowledge of the equipment. They should be given time to learn and understand the operation of the equipment. Then the staff must set their aims and objectives in the room. If you keep visiting the MSR without aims and objectives the room will become a boring place.

The multi sensory room is not the answer to communication difficulties, because it does not suit everyone and in this paper I can only outline a small number of ideas. But with a little thought and imagination many communication levels and modes may be assisted. The speech and language therapist will be able to help, so ask them about their views.

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