

HOP five: Listen and you'll hear me ... but only if you communicate in a way that is accessible to the person

Sheridan Forster

In this fifth piece from me, with a reflection on the Hanging Out Program (Forster, 2008), I was drawn to flip the table again. The theme of this edition is "Listen Up". It focuses on listening to the person with profound and multiple learning disabilities (PMLD). Listening, in this context is about using all senses to interpret and advocate alongside the person with PMLD. But I want to think about how the person with PMLD might listen to their communication partners, like support workers, families, and friends, using all of their senses.

The key ingredient for people with PMLD listening to their communication partners is what I have come to call "individual accessibility". I suggest that it is a responsibility of each partner to make themselves accessible to the person with PMLD.

What might individual accessibility look like?

To be accessible to another person, I have come to understand, there might be two core components.

Firstly, being individually accessible to a person with PMLD involves communicating with the person in a way with which they have the highest chance of being able to understand meanings. This will mean different things for each individual – there is no collective concept of individual accessibility, because it is targeted to each individual. For some people it might mean using familiar single words or phrases, accompanied by musicality. For some, it might mean presenting information visually: your face, the objects, some pictures. For some, information and attention may best be shared through touch of different intensities, rhythms, and positions. This part of individual accessibility calls us to ask ourselves, did I communicate that message in a way that could be best understood and shared with the person, or was it not accessible to the person?

The second part of individual accessibility is setting up a way that encourages reciprocity or joining in and taking a part in the engagement. This takes some more thinking – "what can I do that sets up a way that the person can respond or join in the interaction with me"? This is also unique to each person. A person using single words may be able to repeat single words if you use the words with them, as opposed to long sentences. A person may be able to respond with an arm shake, if your message was delivered with an arm jiggle. A person may be able to reciprocate an interested gaze if you initiate interest with an exaggerated gaze forward within the person's vision.

Using or doing what a person can/has already done is a good way of communicating, as the person has a ready-made way of doing what they can already do, again. However, if you engage in a way that a person cannot return, then a door is shut in a potential engagement.

Greetings are one example of being mindful of being individually accessible. For example, I visited David the other day. When I greeted David with words, I was aware that his means of communication (not a user of speech) did not allow him to reciprocate. I refined my greeting by holding my fist 10 cm from his fist, to offer a fist bump greeting. Again, he did not respond. So, I shaped my message again, giving his elbow a jiggle with my elbow. This time, he greeted me with a wiggle of his elbow and a grin. He took part because I took part in expressing myself in a way that he could respond too.

Nicola Grove's Storysharing, has been an example of individual accessibility. In Storysharing, using stories originating from the disabled person, enhances sharing of meaning, over that of stories not lived by the person. The construction of the story builds in opportunities for the person to take part in a way that is accessible to them, sometimes through a voice output switch, sometimes by movements, sometimes by sounds (read more about Nicola Grove's Storysharing approach on page 11). Later in my visit with David, his dad told the story of being in the bottle shop and a woman dropping her six-pack of stubbies (that's a bottle of beer for non-Aussies). David and I could re-tell the story again by building in a moment in which he could use hand flicks to narrate the crashing bottles. His hands demonstrated understanding and reciprocity to my story that was individually accessible.

Think of your own interactions, watch videos of interactions: have you been individually accessible? Which interactions delivered towards the person have

been individually accessible, understandable to the person, set up for a way for the person to respond? What do the qualities of these interactions say about interactions with the person that they can listen to and join in with?

Accessible information is often talked about, but it only has true meaning at an individual level. No information will be accessible to everyone. Being individually accessible requires a sincere, humble, and respectful examination of what shared meaning and reciprocity can mean to the person. It requires the wisdom to acknowledge when a message has not been understood, and bravery and creativity to reshape the message to be understandable and one that can be joined in with.

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Sheridan runs a number of communication-focused Facebook groups including one for HOP: Hanging Out Program)
<https://www.facebook.com/groups/334617066670161>

References

Forster, S (2008) Hanging Out Program (HOP).

HOP booklet free to download from: <https://sheridanforster.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/hop-a5.pdf>

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