



Hanging Out café is a success

Sheridan Forster

The Hanging Out Program (HOP) is an approach and attitude to being with people with severe and profound intellectual disability (or anyone really). Originally, it was about committing to spending 10 minutes with a person, giving your full attention and engagement, and making brief notes about it. This year we extended HOP to a two hour Hanging Out Café in collaboration with AGOSCI for International AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication) Awareness Month in October, 2022.

Too often people who do not use voice or communication books/boards or devices, miss out on attention and engagement. In the alternative and augmentative communication community there is some argument whether people who don't use symbolic systems are included as AAC users. With knowledge of this, I alongside with AGOSCI (the Australian group focusing on people with complex communication needs) decided to run an event that would directly target the people most likely to miss out: people who did not use any formal means of communication, but lots of unique ways that we were willing to explore "how do I need to be, in order to be with you?"

We set about creating a single Hanging Out Café event for people who did not use and did not seem to understand speech, alongside experienced communication partners, and people interested in spending time with this group. We booked a venue, set a time (worried over the time crossing over when "shift-changes" often occur for staff), and set about advertising.

Finding experienced communication partners to come along was the easiest task. People who knew about HOP and knew me, immediately signed up. The other groups were not so easy...

But how do you bring together people who require someone else to make the choice for them to join in? The first person with a disability to be signed up was a sibling of a speech pathologist who knew about HOP. The next few came from speech pathologists who spoke to families and encouraged them to sign up.

The challenge then hit when I distributed fliers to service managers, service contacts, service newsletters, group home door stops... I was faced with the difficulty of the distance between the person who would benefit from the Hanging Out Café and the hurdles inherent in organisations. A flier to managers could not be assured to get to houses; a flier to a support worker could not be assured to get to the house supervisor who might not make the decision to sign up to something and allocate a support worker, particularly if they did not know who was “on shift” on the day (essential signing up the support worker as well). Unfortunately, no easy solution was found. A few more people came along after I knocked on the door and sat down and chatted to the service manager the day before the event, and I highlighted who and why they may enjoy the event, as they asked the question “so... what exactly will be happening?”.



For some people, it is difficult for them to imagine someone who they perceive as “nonverbal and doesn’t communicate” to be signed up to a social event focusing on communicating with a whole new group of people. Some staff may perceive the person as not interested in interacting and label to person as “wanting their own space”. Overcoming this sort of thinking presents another challenge.

Nevertheless the day came. I had deliberately prepared no activities; I wanted people to informally interact with each other with no pressure on how to interact (but rules to be mindful of anything perceived to be, such as personal touch). It wasn’t an event to teach any of the participants about any theories or knowledge about interactions, although I did have a handful of fliers (e.g., AGOSCI, PMLD-Link, NAC, Sensory Stories, Changing Places Australia). I planned food, packed up the coffee maker.



Surprisingly, I had to fight the urge to bring “equipment/sensory materials/switches/and stuff”. While I knew all these things could be used in interactions, I resolved to set up interactions in an equipment-free way. I wanted people to experience great interactions without special equipment, just like might happen if a person was waiting for an appointment or going to a café.

As the time arrived and I set up my own sensory equipment (aromatherapy, half room lighting, open doors to fresh air) solely for my own regulation, people began to arrive and the magic happened!

Six people with intellectual disabilities came along, with three family members, four support workers, and a speech pathologist. Three “experienced interaction partners” spent time with everyone. Families and support workers mingled with each other and their supported people. Many different forms of communication were used. The means of communication were broader than anticipated with a number of people understanding and using some speech, and those who had them pulled out their iPads with ProLoQuo2Go and LAMP to support conversations. Some people showed their support workers and families what they could do with the help of these ways of communication. There was body language, muscle tension, sounds, smiles, touch, wiggles, jiggles, and shakes, walking (and me knee walking to matching the height of one lady), being guided in and out and all around the room, eyes looking at



people, places, and sometimes away. There was “talking” hands, feet, noses, snuggles, sounds, words, and pictures. There were questions, comments, aghast joy, and at times a little reserved confusion. There were poems shared, stories recited to familiar delight, and a duet of “So Long, Farewell” as one woman headed home.

The unanticipated outcome was how everyone interacted with each other. The curiosity of individuals to wander off and look at another person, the delight in seeing the pictures on someone else’s communication device, the trips to the coffee bar with other people, and the occasional clambering around and over other people as individuals led where they wanted to go. Even the exploration of the neighbouring art exhibition at our community venue.

The event was a great success. A family member commented, “I can see in the future that the Hanging Out Café, with its relaxed atmosphere will be a fun and easy environment for all who attend to learn from and look forward to”. An experienced partner stated that it was “A perfect way to spend a Saturday afternoon, making some fabulous new friends, hanging out in the moment”. The photos capture what our folks who do not use words or symbols (or use minimal or unclear words/symbols) say.

The first of many!

Contact details

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

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