

Communication for NOW to support communication in the future: Exploring and promoting shared meaning in interactions between adults with severe and profound intellectual disability and their partners

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Short Abstract

People with severe and profound intellectual disability communicate; however, often they are described as non-communicative or are alienated from interactions, risking isolation. They may not use symbols or use a small number alongside body movements, facial expression, sounds, and looking.

In this workshop we will explore interaction with people with severe and profound intellectual disability through an idea of shared meaning. Shared meaning is when two people are able to share some degree of meaning with each other. We will look at videos of interactions for shared meaning.

We will introduce the ideas of NOW and NEXT communication. NOW communication refers to a person's current means of understanding and expressing, and partner's fitting those means. NEXT communication refers to teaching the person new means of understanding and expressing in order to participate in more complex forms of communication, or potentially revealing unseen existing skills.

We will explore how breakdowns in shared meaning may occur because individual means of communication are not accommodated by partners. Forms of this type of 'non-communication' may be seen in engagements like greetings (e.g., only using spoken modes to greet someone with deafblindness).

We will explore how shared meaning may be worked towards, and how next means of communication may be scaffolded on top of NOW communication optimising shared meaning.

An individually accessible environment may be created for the person to understand the communication delivered to them and be supported to use their present means of communication, to truly be 'All in: Innovate, Interact, and Include'.

Long Abstract

People with severe and profound intellectual disability communicate. However too often they are described as non-communicative or are alienated from interactions and

are at risk of isolation (Gjermestad et al., 2023; Grace & Nind, 2024; Vehmas & Mietola, 2021). They may not use symbols or only use a small number of symbols, and often use body movements, facial expression, sounds, and looking. Sometimes these expressions can be idiosyncratic and ambiguous.

In this workshop we will explore interaction with people with severe and profound intellectual disability through an idea of shared meaning. Shared meaning is when two people are able to share some degree of meaning with each other through being understandable to each other. Shared meaning has sometimes been called intersubjectivity; the sharing of two people's minds. It extends beyond observing and interpreting what a person may feel, to sharing the feeling with the person in a way that they might be able to understand. Meaning can be shared without words (Grace et al., 2024; Grace & Nind, 2024; Roehr, 2023; Van Goidsenhoven & De Schauwer, 2020).

A developing model of shared meaning will be shared that includes features of the person with a disability (e.g. cognitive, physical, sensory skills and temperament), features of the partner (e.g., training, culture, workplace culture), and the movement between shared meaning and its absence. The features of communication specialists in aiding shared meaning will also be explored (e.g., their experience of shared meaning, research knowledge, models of service delivery).

Shared meaning may be argued as a key feature of quality interaction between people with severe or profound intellectual disability and their interaction partners (Damen et al., 2014; Penninga et al., 2022). The moments of understanding each other form empathy (Skarsaune, 2023), ascription of meaning, enacting of self-determination (Skarsaune & Hanisch, 2023), the beginnings of autonomy, and inclusion (Grace & Nind, 2024).

Without shared meaning, there is a persistent distance between the person and their partner. We may say that this is in fact a state of non-communication.

We will look at videos of interactions for shared meaning. Participants will explore the features observable when the partners are in connection. Furthermore, the impact of being in this sort of connection will be explored. Moments of shared meaning will be contrasted to moments when it is absent.

We will introduce the ideas of NOW and NEXT communication (Forster, 2019). NOW communication refers to a person's current means of understanding and expression, and partner's fitting those means to enable shared meaning. NEXT communication refers to teaching the person new means of understanding and expression in order to participate in my complex forms of communication, or increasingly creating opportunities for an individual to use their full range of communicative behaviours more often with more people.

We will explore how breakdowns in shared meaning may occur because individual means of communication are not accommodated by partners. These forms of this type of non-communication may be seen in things like greetings only using spoken means, to instances of assumptions of informed choice where comprehension and means of expression are not supported.

We will explore how shared meaning may be worked towards. This will include explicitly naming shared meaning in assessment reports and interventions with

support teams. Video recordings of interactions may be used to unveil tacit understanding of shared meaning (Kruithof et al., 2024). It includes supporting individuals to see when they have achieved shared meaning, celebrating the importance of this, and promoting more opportunities to enter into shared meaning. This may also involve challenging assumptions or long held beliefs in the disability support industry, such as the avoidance of attachment and the place of touch in interactions (Forster & Iacono, 2008; Martin & Hanley, 2022; Skarsaune & Hanisch, 2023).

We will propose that in order to maintain a focus on shared meaning, it may be important to prioritise a NOW communication focus to ensure the partners meet the person with their current skills and support needs. NEXT communication should be scaffolded on top of shared meaning, so that people are not being solely communicated with using means that they do not presently understand, albeit means that we may intend to be understood and used in the future.

Understanding interactions from the frame of shared meaning, NOW and NEXT communication can shape how we support people with severe and profound intellectual disability. Communication assessments focus on the fit of partners with people's present understanding and expressions. Recommendations focus on enhancing the fit so that shared meaning becomes optimally possible. Subsequently partners are responsible for the first changes to meet the person with disability at their needs, in contrast to the initial objective of changing the skills of the person with disability to a higher level of complexity. A truly individually accessible environment is created for the person to understand the communication delivered to them and be supported to be able to use their present means of communication to truly be 'All in: Innovate, Interact, and Include',

(References have been deleted to fit wordspace - available on request)