

6th Dbl European Conference on Deafblindness
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Leisure and Play Stream - 5th and 6th August 2005

Introductory Presentation

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Introduction

What we are going to argue over the next two days is that Leisure and Play are defining aspects of our humanity. At the outset, I am not going to offer particular definitions of Leisure and of play, but maybe we will work towards those ourselves as we go through the various presentations and discussions that will be offered in the stream.

We will, however, argue that play is a central foundation of child development and is a primary vehicle for the development of communication and language. We are also going to argue that throughout our lives leisure and play opportunities allow us to tap into our expressive creativity. Leisure and play permit us to sustain friendships and relationships, and they help us to forge our own unique identities.

Let's digress for a few moments – if you feel comfortable then join hands with the person sitting next to you and let your imagination come along with mine for just a few minutes. Ignore the spectacular sunshine that we are experiencing here in Slovakia today, and imagine yourself instead in Scotland on a cold winter's night. It's just begun to snow outside and you've just come in from the cold, after a day walking through a forest and having been down at

the seaside to watch a wild storm whip up the waves, into a crescendo of fabulous sights and sounds. When you walk into this wonderful big room, you notice that there are dozens of your friends seated around a hot, blazing log fire - if you listen very carefully, you will almost hear the crackling of the logs. In the far corner of the room, you can hear that most wonderful of sounds on the planet – the gentle flow of red wine as it pours over the lip of the bottle and gently cascades towards the wine glass. This is the kind of night we're now settling in for. This isn't a workshop at a Dbl conference. Instead we've all been transported to a glorious Scottish glen in mid-winter, with mountains and friends all around, the wine is flowing at the same pace as the conversation and we're ready to engage in one of those discussions that you can only have with friends, where the problems of the world seem effortless to solve, but only after vigorous discussion, lots of falling out, an equal amount of making up, an abundance of laughter and a sense of warmth, friendship and togetherness.

Well, we can't promise you the wine, but hopefully we can achieve all of the rest and over the next two days we hope to have some earnest discussion, so that we can achieve a rounded picture of what is meant by leisure and play and share with each other, some real ideas about what is possible for all of us, including deafblind people.

But let's first outline a number of key themes that will help frame our discussions:

- Connections
- Intersubjectivity
- Identity
- Authenticity

Connections

There's a wonderful writer, Judith Snow who offers us the following description of what it is to be human:

“We often think of human life as residing in individual bodies. We think about each other as I were a Thing and you were a Thing and we two Things interact now and then, all the while remaining separate entities. This is not a very powerful model for describing how our lives are sustained or how we in fact develop our capacity to contribute to each other and to our society at large.

I believe that it is more powerful to think about human life as if it were a thread floating between and connecting bodies – giving each body the capacity to be a person. Alone I am alive but not revealed or fulfilled. In relationship with one person I am able to become the qualities that the relationship allows for...

When I come into relationship with two people I acquire the capacity to become more than twice of what I am with one person. The presence of both individuals to each other creates possibilities that don't exist with each alone with me...

As an individual's relationships increase in number and diversity the possibilities for that person give great room for that person to both become themselves and draw forth new capacity in others. In other words one or two threads will offer little support but a gossamer network of even five or six threads has strength to sustain a rich life”.

(Snow, J. (2000) 'The Power in Vulnerability' in **A Little Book About Person Centred Planning**, ed. O'Brien, J. and O'Brien, C.L., Inclusion Press)

(Think for a moment about all of your relationships and how those various people all might connect. These connections hold you together and give you a sense of purpose and a sense of identity in the way that Judith Snow describes.

So for me I can be a son, a brother, an uncle, a cousin, a nephew, a friend, a lover, an employee, a colleague at work, a mate on the football pitch, in the pub, up a hill, at the beach etc, etc. And in some respects for some of these roles, I do not have to do anything – I am these things because of the other people – because my niece is born, I become an uncle, because my sister is born, I become a brother – so I am who I am in part because other people exist. But I can decide to play all of these roles in particular ways –uncles do particular things (e.g. taking nieces and nephews to the cinema, camping trips, playing chess, always getting beaten at computer games) and in doing these things I can feel both valued and valuable as an uncle. The same would be true for the other roles that I mentioned earlier. So for all the people we support in our services we could ask: if they are already uncles, do they get to do ‘uncley’ things, if they are sisters do they get to act as sisters, if they are sons, do they get to act as sons? And are there sufficient opportunities for people to play some of the other roles in life that we could think of – friends, lovers, artists, sportswomen etc?)

And then I'd offer this also in our discussions here:

Communication is the means by which people connect with their environment and with other people. Communication is the way we reach out to each other, it is the way we ‘touch’ each other.....Communication IS connection.

(Miles, B and Riggio, M (1999) Remarkable Conversations, Baltimore Press)

And sitting behind all of this are the words of a brilliant Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray, who writes:

'...the unit of personal existence is not the individual but two persons in personal relation; and that we are persons not by individual right, but in virtue of our relation to one another... The unit of the personal is not the 'I' but the 'You and I.'

(Macmurray, John (1961) *Persons in relation*, London, Faber and Faber)

So connection is one backdrop to all of our discussions over the next 2 days and within it there are a number of challenges:

- How to make connections, relationships and intimacy central parts of our day to day lives alongside deafblind people or people with multiple disabilities.
- Norman Brown wrote some time ago that if we were really interested in developing communication partnerships with deafblind people we had to 'become co-learners'. You can see already the enormous challenges facing people in their day-to-day teaching roles. Am I supposed to be the learner as much as my pupil is, or to put it another way, is the pupil as much a teacher as I am? Is that what Norman is really telling me? And if that was not enough of a challenge am I supposed to develop a partnership, make a connection, am I supposed to really and genuinely be interested in the deafblind child in front of me? Get away, that's obviously not what they really mean. Connect on an equal basis? But I think they do really mean that.
- Nafstad and Rødbroe have suggested an 'absolute subjection of oneself to the deafblind child's needs'- that's a slightly different view of education – no it's a radically different view.

- And also the psychiatrist Ashley Montagu, who in exploring the importance of touch, helps explain why it is central to the development of infants and within this context he discusses education – not in terms of schools, universities etc but in terms of the original Latin definition of nurturing and growing. And he asks, nurturing and growing what? Well he says, basic behavioural needs and of these the greatest is love

LOVE - to be loved and to love

(But of course anyone who has watched the film Moulin Rouge will know that anyway, because it is here that Ewan McGregor reminds us that “the greatest thing you’ll ever learn is just to love and be loved in return”).

Intersubjectivity

Leading from that sense of connection is what psychologists call intersubjectivity and we would call the ability of two minds to get in connection with each other. And this important idea is what sits as the foundation to communication and language and I think we'll see later that intersubjectivity can be achieved quite effortlessly through play.

But what is it? How can we define it?

.....intersubjectivity is achieved 'through recognition and coordination of intentions'

(Göncü, A. (1998) 'Development of intersubjectivity in social pretend play' in Woodhead, M., Faulkner, D. and Littleton, K (eds) Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood, London, Routledge)

This tells us something about the relationships that ought to exist between communication partners. We need to both recognize and respond to the actions of another person. And we have numerous examples of how to do this on the Dbl Communication Network videos.

And we can learn still more about the nature of these relationships from Nadel and Camaioni:

.....a communicative episode is 'an on-line process of adaptation to each other within which intentions and emotions are shared and negotiated'.

(Nadel, J. and Camaioni, L. (1993) *New perspectives in early communicative development*, London, Routledge)

An on-line process of adaptation is a fabulous way of describing the need for a communication partner to be alert to actions, whether these be movements, gestures or vocalisations made by the other person. And if we want to be intersubjective, then we have to recognise and respond. Co-ordinating our actions with those of another lies at the root of the communicative process. (See the Dbl Communication Network videos, The Emergence of Communication for many excellent examples of how to do this).

Goncu suggests that 'play is inherently intersubjective'. Rødbroe and Souriau (2000) also express the pre-eminence of play as a learning context and Nafstad and Rodbroe in their fabulous books on co-creative communication gives many possibilities for social interactive games. Play for infants and toddlers is about learning to communicate and interact (Göncü, 1998; Dunn, 1998; Trevarthen, 1999), for pre-school children it is about learning how to establish groups and maintain them (Kantor et al, 1998) and for preadolescents, games are where you might find answers to sensitive questions. Adolescents continue this desire to explore sensitive questions with their friends and the type and level of intimacy required for this is reported across various cultures. And perhaps we will return to some ideas here throughout the stream.

We can see that partnership is vital and that sense of just being together in the moment.

(I'm going to digress slightly again and look at the ever-expanding use of the English language that has come from the Dbl Communication Network. There are now phrases in use that would ordinarily not be used by people for whom English is their first language, but for me they describe this communication process most beautifully. How about Marleen Janssen's PhD thesis that was all about 'Fostering Harmonious interactions' or Nafstad and Rodbroe who describe 'joyful togetherness'? These are phrases that capture the essence of human partnerships and we welcome them into our daily language).

Identity

Identity is another key backdrop in our deliberations over the next 2 days.

A few years ago a survey was undertaken in Scotland about youth lifestyles in which young people were questioned about citizenship, identity, leisure and lifestyle amongst other topics. ('Portrait of Young Scotland', **Scotland on Sunday**, October 2003). If we consider the 11-16 age group the most important activities they were involved with were:

Listening to music – 81%

Going to friend's houses – 79%

Watching TV – 77%

Texting friends – 67%

Talking on the phone – 66%

Playing computer games – 55%

Hanging about the streets – 52%

Surfing the net – 52%

Going to the cinema – 50%

Reading books / magazines – 46%

Taking part in sport / games – 45%

Email – 39%

Visiting relatives – 38%

Caring for pets – 30%

Going to discos – 29%

Going to youth clubs – 25%

If we consider the 17-25 year old age group:

Watch TV – 81%

Listen to music – 77%

Going to the pub – 65%

Go to a night club – 52%

Listen to radio – 51%

Use the internet – 48%

Use a computer – 46%

Shopping for pleasure – 43%

Go to cinema – 40%

Rent a video – 37%

Read a book – 35%

Play computer games – 29%

Eat out – 29%

Go walking – 28%

Go to a gym – 26%

Go to live music – 25%

Participate in sport – 22%

(Items in bold represent activities to do with friends).

Central to many of these activities are friends, so somehow or other we are not venturing very far away from the need to have other people in our lives. That sense of connection keeps coming back to haunt us. But we can see other essentials. We can see that **freedom** plays an important role – freedom to express ourselves, freedom to be on our own at times, freedom, to determine what we listen to and what we do with our time, freedom to develop your identity through the activities you engage in. And **thought** also plays a part for these young people in the survey – they read, they surf the net, they learn, they engage with other people to debate, discuss and to understand

who they are. So being yourself, being with others and being involved in activities are all important.

Our social networks allow us to develop a sense of who we are and think how challenging this is in the context of inclusion. My nieces and nephews might meet their friends at school, but they sustain those friendships outwith of school – and often without adult support. Across lots of Europe, inclusion is a hotly-debated topic and it is relatively easy to see how it is possible to include people in schools, but go back to those lists and let's ask ourselves, how many services could get funding to help young people achieve real inclusion so that they can sustain their friendships and through those friendships, develop their identity and self-esteem? Could you get funding to go to nightclubs, to shop only for pleasure, to eat out with friends, to hang about on street corners, to go round to friends' houses? That would make a really interesting point of debate over the next 2 days and if we could hear about examples of good practice there, we can all take those ideas back to our own situations.

But it isn't just young people who develop and sustain their identity through leisure pursuits and hobbies. My colleague in Scotland, Drena O'Malley who is the Chief Executive of Deafblind Scotland, supporting people with acquired deafblindness, tells of a situation a few years ago, when a project was established to encourage deafblind people to come together to try out new activities and hobbies – say for example, 10-pin bowling. The idea was that having learned about the activity, deafblind people would join existing clubs – that's not quite what happened. Deafblind people quite liked getting together and wanted to stay together, but politicians and funders didn't always see it like that because it seemed to run counter to inclusion agendas. And I'm always reminded of a Canadian writer, Dave Hinsburger who visited Glasgow for the first time a few years ago and I attended a small meeting with him. He was there to talk mainly about people with learning disabilities, but when we

get to the punch line of this story that I will tell you, we can easily think of deafblind people as well. He told the meeting in the morning that he was disturbed by what he had read in the local evening paper on his first night in Glasgow. He saw that there were youth clubs and he felt this was bad, because young people shouldn't be segregated and at some point they would have to learn anyway to get along with older people. He saw also that there were gay bars in the town and his first response was that they would have to close – gay people shouldn't be segregated but would have to learn to get on with heterosexual people. And he noticed some women's groups – they would definitely have to close because in his opinion it was about time women should come out of their segregation and learn to socialise with men. On an on he went, closing down pensioner's groups, private clubs, bars that mainly attracted grumpy old men etc. And at the point when he thought we all understood the ridiculous position he was adopting, he asked why then is it that we all feel that people with learning disabilities shouldn't get together – we avoid groups and segregation all in the name of inclusion – but yet we don't worry when we want to be exclusive and meet with like-minded people. A few months ago in Scotland, our Healthy Living project organised a fun day and dozens of congenitally deafblind people, people with autism and people with learning disabilities voted with their feet and turned up. The day ran counter to mainstream inclusion opportunities but yet it seemed to strike a chord with people who wanted to be there.

But I am definitely not suggesting that deafblind people should only meet with deafblind people, although I am suggesting that we should be open to that as a possibility. I am suggesting, however, that we should always be in a position to support people to be involved in whatever activities they wish to be and certainly to continue involvement in activities that are crucial to their own identity. I'll let you know a bit about my identity. I love music and I wouldn't be me if I wasn't able to participate regularly in various musical groups. I like drinking beer and meeting up with friends in the pub and that's also part of

who I am. I like getting outdoors, walking, golfing, visiting coastlines and visiting new Scottish islands every year. I wouldn't be me if I couldn't get to do those things. I like watching sport, particularly football. And so if these things are part of me and help me to sustain friendships and help to preserve my identity, if I were to become deafblind it would seem important to me to carry these activities on. And that is the enormous challenge that faces service deafblind people and those people who support them. How can people retain their identity, as well as beginning to develop new connections and possibly different identities? Again, we'd be interested to debate these points over the next 2 days.

(How did I choose my half dozen activities that are really important to me? An exercise I sometimes do in training is to ask people to write down all the activities they have ever tried in their lives. When I do this, I can easily find hundreds and hundreds. I then ask people to write the key hobbies and interests that are really important to them today and my list is only about 6 long. So I have found my 6 key hobbies and interests from trying out 100s. And so if you are working alongside someone and people say to you that they are not motivated to do anything, that's maybe because they haven't yet found the activity that really makes them tick, maybe they've not yet tried enough new experiences – so that's part of the challenge in supporting someone, particularly someone who is congenitally deafblind – to find ongoing new experiences).

Identity is closely related to a sense of deafblind culture and I don't propose to go into culture debates over the next 2 days because it is not a particular area of familiarity to me, but there are very real debates ongoing at present and Drena O'Malley, from Deafblind Scotland and Susannah Barnett, from Sense have both done some really exciting work in this area.

Authenticity

There is a fabulous English practitioner in the field of learning disability and autism, Phoebe Caldwell, who supports the development of communication for individuals using an approach called Intensive Interaction, which is closely related to the ideas of the Dbl Communication Network. When she is asked if she ever feels self-conscious or embarrassed about the close, intimate, physical connections she makes with people, she suggests that if you are feeling self-conscious then you are not fully engaged with the other person. She reminds us that you must bring your authentic self to the communication situation and when Inger Rodbroe visited Scotland a few years ago, she told us a similar thing.

And for me, this is part of the reason why the arts, music, drama, outdoor education etc all help support the development of communication. You cannot be involved in a music session, and not feel the emotional impact. If you are on a rock-face with a deafblind person and one of you slips, then the emotional impact of that is real for both people. If you are involved in pulling together a theatre production (and we'll hear more about this later), then you are all caught up with the excitement, the fear, the panic, the relief etc and all these feelings are real and they all allow 2 human minds to come together.

We will consider one example on video:

Jon (the worker) and Jonathan (the child), where we see an art activity, turning into an episode of symbolic play, turning into a music activity, all the while being an excellent example of an excellent communication partnership.

The videos allows us to see the following elements:

- ❑ real demonstration of emotion
- ❑ and real involvement in an activity
- ❑ absolute subjection of oneself to the deafblind person
- ❑ flexibility and improvising through play –
- ❑ establish new boundaries for the communicative relationship
- ❑ develop one activity but go somewhere else).

....the arts enrich us by giving access to resources that are untapped in many people's lives. In the 1980s it was all about proving the arts are good for the economy, in the 1990s the emphasis was on looking at the social aspect of the arts. Now we're taking a closer look at the intrinsic, inherent value of the arts and how they affect the individual....what you might call the psychological, or even the spiritual value of the arts

(Mark Sheridan, The University of Strathclyde Review, 2001)

He mentioned the psychological value of the arts and what might this be?

- ❑ The arts can reveal a level of skill that an individual already has and that can be further developed and built on
- ❑ The arts can reveal communication and language abilities that we might otherwise ignore
- ❑ The arts allow us to view other people as equals

And what about the spiritual values?

- ❑ The arts allow us to see the creative potential of every person
- ❑ To see the essential humanity in every person

- ❑ To understand another person as an individual striving to make sense of their world and their place in it – that spiritual longing that rests within each of us.

It's not just that the Arts simply allow these areas to develop, but they actually allow them to be revealed.

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