



COMMUNICATION NETWORK UPDATE SERIES

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DbI's Network on Communication and Congenitally Deafblind Persons

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Introduction

The DbI Communication Network started in 1992 as an initiative of five persons, working in the field of services for persons with congenital deafblindness. These persons are: Anne Nafstad, Skådalen Resource Center, Oslo, Norway; Inger Rødbroe, The Resource Center of Congenital Deafblindness, Aalborg, Denmark; Jacques Souriau, CRESAM, Poitiers, France; Marlene Daelman, KMPI Spermalie, Brugge, Belgium and Ton Visser, Viataal, Sint-Michielsgestel, The Netherlands. The DbI Communication Network started as a study group of these five persons, supported by their organizations.

In 2003 Marleen Janssen, University of Groningen, The Netherlands and Flemming Ask Larsen, Skådalen Resource Center, Oslo, Norway joint the group.

There were two main reasons to take the initiative to start a “study group”. Working in the field of persons with congenital deafblindness we were unsatisfied that the focus in seminars on staff training was more and more on management aspects and less on the content of our work itself. For some time we felt a strong need to re-think our concepts with regard to the development of social interaction and early communication in persons with congenital deafblindness. Each of us was looking for adequate literature, analyzing our own video-material, etc. It was clear to us that sharing our knowledge and clinical experience could enrich our efforts.

The “study group” started by studying literature coming from outside our field looking for general accepted theoretical concepts with regard to the development of social interaction and early communication. The next step was to analyze video tapes of developing social interaction and early development of communication in persons with congenital deafblindness. In analyzing these tapes we tried to figure out which of the generally accepted concepts in child development were useful

as a theoretical framework with regard to our own work.

In the period 1993 – 1996 we focused on the topic “development of social interaction” in persons with congenital deafblindness. After we had studied recent literature and analyzed a lot of videos we organized an “expert-meeting” in 1995. We invited researchers whose publications we had frequently used. We requested them to give feedback on the theoretical framework chosen and the way we tried to implement the theoretical concepts in our daily practice by demonstrating them on video. The expert meeting was a big success and we decided to organize, in cooperation with CNEFFEI, an international course in Paris on this topic. During the course in 1996 we focused on how motivating interactive experiences between the deafblind person and their partners do offer the right conditions for the deafblind person to participate in sustained interaction, and we discovered that these sequences of sustained interactions triggered natural gesture expressions in the deafblind person from these experiences. Both written proceedings and a video are available from this course.

During 1996 – 1999 the focus of the working group was “the development of a first vocabulary in persons with congenital deafblindness”. We focused on how the body expressions can create a base for both partners to engage in negotiations of shared meaning and a first shared vocabulary. The approach of our group was in this period the same as in the previous: studying literature looking for useful theoretical concepts, analyzing our videotapes, and organizing an expert meeting and finally a course in 1999. Also from this course written proceedings and a video tape are available.

In 2000 and 2001 the main focus was the implementation of the new concepts developed in the six years before and expressed in the courses in

1996 and 1999. In 2001 representatives of different countries shared their experiences in working with the new concepts and theoretical framework in a seminar which took place in Paris. To facilitate this process the working group designed a new developmental scheme, which is very helpful in analyzing the different layers in the emerging of communication in persons with congenital deafblindness.

On this moment The Communication Network, as we now prefer to call the group, is moving its focus from studying communication from the point of view of interaction, dialogue and intersubjective regulations to investigating how meaning is shared, conveyed and established during communicative episodes. This does not mean that we change subjects, or move to another chapter. It simply means that we are discovering how the content of the exchanges is a deep and powerful element in the communication processes. In May 2003 there was a mini-seminar on "Semiotic Analysis" at NUD, Dronninglund, Denmark. Two main concepts were addressed during this seminar: "narratives" and "blending". The first concept "narratives" covers a kind of story telling experiences which do not necessarily have the form of language exchange, but have a real potential for developing complexity, sustaining exchanges, forming a secure identity and integrating linguistic forms. The second concept ("blending") points at how we during communicative experiences use blends of various levels of experiences (for instance mimetic and linguistic expressions, or the elements of a previous narrative to qualify another one, etc.) in a fast, coherent and effective way, in order to make sense.

In collaboration with NUD a conference on "Co-creating communication" will take place in Oslo, April 2006, which will reflect the essential focus areas since 2001. These areas are: Models from cognitive semiotics used to support our understanding of the processes of meaning making in conversations with deafblind persons, meaning potentials in spontaneous gestures, and dialogicality as the way human beings share feelings and

thoughts. The conference will also address culturalization which is pointing to future focus areas of The Communication Network.

Two other projects have emerged from the work in The Communication Network and both projects are closely related to the studies of the group:

September, 2006 a Master's Programme on Communication and Congenital Deafblindness start at University of Groningen, The Netherlands. The content of this programme is based on the knowledge developed in The Communication Network.

Viataal in The Netherlands and The Danish Resource Centre of Congenital Deafblindness have initiated a joint project with the objectives of producing teaching materials for parents and staff working in the deafblind field. 4 booklets and DVD's will be developed on communication and deafblindness. The content of these booklets will be based on the work of The Communication Network, and the DVDs will illustrate the concepts described in the booklets.

It is important to mention that a lot of colleagues from all over Europe contributed to the dynamics of our search for better communication with congenitally deafblind children and adults. They shared their experience, their data and their comments and we would really like this to continue. We would also like to stress the support from NUD to our work by organising or hosting events which contribute directly or indirectly to improving our knowledge. From May 2003 NUD have been supporting The Communication Network by publishing on its homepage texts written by our group, which we hope could be of interest to many colleagues. These texts will be edited under the title CNUS: Communication Network Update Series. From 2006 the CNUS texts will be available at the homepage of Deafblind International.



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