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Using Imitation with Congenitally Deafblind Adults: Establishing Meaningful Communication Partnerships

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All congenitally deafblind people are potential communication partners. The key question for practitioners is how to help them achieve that potential. Imitation offers a particularly powerful means of doing so because it allows both partners to occupy a joint dyadic space, where the process of repairing the damaged communication partnerships that many deafblind people have been forced to function within throughout their lives can begin. I will first outline a brief history of deafblind education over the last 150 years in order to provide a general account of changes in practice and theory and corresponding impacts on interventions. I will then describe some of the difficulties that congenitally deafblind people face in making contact with and being understood by other people before drawing on both practical examples and theoretical accounts on neonatal imitation to examine four key functions that imitation plays in facilitating communicative exchanges between deafblind individuals and their partners: it attracts attention, it stimulates turn-taking, it allows partners to recognize each other and it reveals the other as 'just like me'. I will conclude that imitation is simply the starting place for a journey towards a 'natural' language for congenitally deafblind people, a language where meanings are jointly negotiated from the actions, gestures and vocalizations that develop between deafblind people and their communication partners. This starting place is the same for congenitally deafblind people as it is for all infants: a companion space where imitation acts a powerful and immediate source of feedback about your value as a fellow human being. Copyright © 2006 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

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1 INTRODUCTION

3 All congenitally deafblind people are potential communication partners. The key
5 question for practitioners, such as myself, is how to help them achieve that
7 potential. In this paper, I aim to show that imitation offers a particularly powerful
9 means of doing so. This is because, as an intersubjective process, it allows both
11 partners to occupy a joint dyadic space (Rødbroe & Souriau, 2000) or, in
13 Kugiumutzakis' (1998) terms, a 'companion space'. Sharing such a space begins
15 the process of repairing the damaged communication partnerships that many
17 deafblind people have been forced to function within throughout their lives.
19 Imitation offers a path out of confusion, mistrust, and isolation, replaced by the
21 prospect of engagement, cooperation, and greater self-worth.

Because infancy researchers are likely to be unfamiliar with the history of
deafblind education, I will start with a brief outline of its history over the past 150
years. I will then describe some of the difficulties that deafblind people face in
making contact with and being understood by other people. Finally, I will explore
the reasons that imitation should be so effective in establishing communicative
exchanges. It is here that particular connections will be made with the literature
on infant imitation, given the extent to which contemporary approaches to in-
tervention are coming to rely on infant theory.

23 A BRIEF HISTORY OF DEAFBLIND EDUCATION

25 The history of deafblind education really begins in the 19th century and can be
27 seen as occurring in 3 main periods (Enerstvedt, 1996; Visser, 1999). Prior to this,
little is known about deafblind people, although they have undoubtedly existed
throughout history.

29 The first period stretches between 1800 and 1950, during which time there were
31 a number of dramatic teaching successes accomplished with deafblind people,
33 which attracted attention from all over the world. Names such as Helen Keller,
35 Laura Bridgman, and Olga Skorokhodova gained international fame. Language,
37 in spoken, signed, finger-spelled and written form, was reported for many of
39 these famous deafblind individuals, which came about from painstaking, indi-
41 vidualized teaching (as described in detail by Enerstvedt, 1996). Language dur-
ing this period was seen as a skill that resided in the world and in the teacher,
and it was his/her job to transfer this human skill to the deafblind child. This is a
model reminiscent of Freire's (1971) 'banking' metaphor of education, which
holds that if a teacher makes sufficient 'deposits' in a child's mind, sooner or later
these will accrue interest and the child will be able to make use of the intended
skill.

43 The second period runs from the 1950s until the late 1980s and is marked by
45 significant developments at both practical and theoretical levels (McInnes &
47 Treffry, 1982; Moray House, 1993; Van Dijk, 1989) due in part to the changing
49 nature of the congenitally deafblind population, with an increasing number of
children born deafblind as a result of rubella epidemics throughout the world.
Innovations in practice were often being led by an increasing emphasis on the
importance of relationship, resonance, and co-active movement. Emotional
bonding, with its interactive routines, came to be regarded as the bedrock on
which future learning could be built.

51 Between about 1950 and 1980, a central educational goal for practitioners was
teaching deafblind individuals to use a symbolic linguistic system. That is, their

1 aim was to help deafblind people develop communicative skills that resembled
2 those of hearing and sighted people. A common teaching approach was the use
3 of tactile calendars, which provided objects of reference to symbolize specific
4 activities and events. It was intended that a person would be able to plan and
5 review their day and also be given information from others about what was
6 happening, by placing the relevant objects into a series of boxes on the calendar.
7 The expectation was that the objects might eventually come to be replaced by
8 other symbolic, communicative means, such as words or Braille (Moray House,
9 1993; Souriau, 1990).

10 However, such linguistic competence was very rarely achieved (Souriau, 1990).
11 Declarative communication, where an individual seeks to relate an experience to
12 another person, was rarely seen in deafblind people (Rødbroe & Souriau, 2000).
13 There rarely emerged any examples of individuals being able to share feelings or
14 events that were removed from the 'here and now', including wishes for what
15 they would like to do in the future or memories of experiences they had had in
16 the past. Rødbroe and Souriau (2000) have charged that this is because the
17 teaching methods relied too much on symbolic communicative systems, viewing
18 communication primarily as a means of delivering messages, rather than as a
19 means of people engaging emotionally and psychologically with one another.
20 Effectively, educational methods were continuing to place teachers in the role of
21 'providing' the language that was lacking. Moreover, when the person 'failed' to
22 acquire the intended linguistic skills (as was usually the case), the cause of the
23 failure was attributed to the person's disability, rather than to the teaching
24 methods. That is, the breakdown in communication was located within the
25 deafblind person and not within their partner.

26 During the 1990s, the start of the third period, practitioners frustrated with
27 such outcomes increasingly returned to the child development literature in an
28 attempt to discover whether there was something so unique about congenital
29 deafblindness that language acquisition was an impossible goal. They began to
30 ask: might the difficulties shown by deafblind people in language acquisition
31 have less to do with their disability and more to do with ineffective pedagogical
32 methods (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1997; Visser, 1999)? Or to put the debate more
33 sharply, might it have to do with ineffective roles played by the partner, albeit
34 unwittingly? (Pease, 2000). Publications throughout the 1990s stressed the value
35 of replicating 'standard' child and infant development, where the more compe-
36 tent communicative partner responded contingently—and, significantly for the
37 aims of this paper, often imitatively—to the actions, gestures, and vocalizations of
38 less competent partners (Lee & MacWilliams, 1995, 2002; Nafstad & Rødbroe,
39 1999; Nind & Hewitt 1994, 2001). Such exchanges came to be increasingly
40 regarded as an essential starting point for any communicative partnership.

41 Putting these insights into practice generated a range of new approaches to
42 deafblind education. Indeed, the theoretical shift, and the impact it had on the
43 nature of interventions, was so significant that Visser (1999) sees it as signalling
44 the start of a separate, and third, period in the field's history. Nind and Hewitt
45 (1994) developed an imitative technique they labelled Intensive Interaction; Lee
46 and MacWilliams (1995) stressed the importance of co-activity and resonance
47 between two persons' movements; Nafstad and Rødbroe (1999) emphasized the
48 co-creative role that both partners play in negotiating meaning. Two seminal
49 conferences held in Paris in 1996 and 1999 (Deafblind International, 1996, 1999)
50 brought practitioners and researchers together to explore emerging perspectives
51 and findings. In short, the field of deafblind education seems to be finding
answers to a central question: if deafblind people cannot construct a language for

1 themselves, and they cannot simply be 'taught' the language of the dominant
2 culture around them, then is it possible for us to help them to communicate at all?
3 An expanding body of research studies and intervention reports provoke a
4 resounding 'yes'. Arguably, they go even further by generating understanding
5 about fundamental human developmental processes.

7 COMMUNICATIVE CHALLENGES FOR DEAFBLIND PEOPLE

9
10 I now wish to develop a richer picture of the kinds of challenges that congenitally
11 deafblind people face in their day-to-day lives as they attempt to engage with the
12 world around them and to communicate with other people in that world. While
13 some hurdles of course stem directly from an absence of vision and hearing, I will
14 focus here on the difficulties that involve communicative partners. This is
15 because so many of the hurdles facing deafblind people are generated by the
16 attitudes and actions of partners.

17 For deafblind children, the process of communication goes wrong literally
18 from the moment of birth (Pease, 2000) because there are inherent difficulties that
19 dual sensory impairment brings for both infant and carer in achieving any co-
20 ordination of actions (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1997). Deafblind babies will be unable
21 to perceive the invitation offered by a protruding adult tongue or by an adult
22 echoing their own vocalizations. This leads to a 'mismatch between the imme-
23 diate behaviour repertory of the congenitally deafblind child and the reactive
24 behaviours of the adult partner' (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1997, pp. 165–166).

25 Fast-forward these initial problematic exchanges through childhood and on
26 into 20, 30, 40 years or more of their life, and it is not difficult to realize that there
27 are many missed opportunities for communicating with other people (Amaral,
28 2003) and that this must have a profound impact on the person's development.
29 Gergen (1991, p. 242) writes that 'individuals, themselves, cannot 'mean' any-
30 thing: their actions are nonsensical until co-ordinated with actions of others. If I
31 extend my hand and smile, the gesture hovers at the edge of absurdity until
32 reciprocated by another'. On any given day there may be thousands of deafblind
33 people in the world, making thousands of attempts to communicate, yet often
34 their gestures will hover at the edge of absurdity because no-one is there to
35 respond in a way that can be perceived by them. It begins to be easy to realize
36 that, for many deafblind adults, their life resembles an on-going, continuous still-
37 face situation (Murray & Trevarthen, 1985; Nadel, 2002; Tronick, Als, Adamson,
38 Wise, & Brazelton, 1978) with all the negative consequences that incurs.

39 Congenital deafblindness need not be constructed as a state in which the
40 absence of sight and hearing presents an insurmountable abyss. It can be con-
41 structed much more actively and positively as a state in which touch constitutes
42 the pre-eminent source of contact with the external world. Such a re-orientation
43 in perspective points towards ways in which communication can be channelled,
44 especially when evidence about single sensory impairments is considered.
45 Research has shown that it is the mismatch between the communicative
46 modalities of two partners that has a more profound effect on development
47 than does the sensory impairment itself (Bakeman & Adamson, 1984; Mohay,
48 1986; Rattray, 2000). Thus, the importance of giving the deafblind person a clear,
49 unambiguous message that their action, whether this is a movement, gesture or
50 vocalization, has led to a contingent response on the part of the partner cannot be
51 overstated. These messages must be given in a way that is perceivable by the
deafblind person; this might be in the tactile medium (including movement,

1 airflow and vibration), but could equally well be through smell or taste (Rødbroe
& Souriau, 2000). By responding in a manner that is meaningful to the deafblind
3 person, rather than only to his/her partner, trust can be established within the
dyad. The experience of trusting, or even expecting, that you will receive a re-
5 sponse from the other—that you can influence someone else’s behaviour—has a
fundamental impact on the development of communicative ability (Nafstad &
7 Rødbroe, 1999). Indeed, research examining the intentional use of such respon-
sive modes has revealed enhanced displays of intersubjectivity and intentionality
9 (Hart, 2001a; Hart & Noble, 2001; Jenkins & Noble, 2002), increased sophistication
in communicative acts (Amaral, 2003; Janssen, 2003), decreases in challenging
11 behaviour (Elgie & Maguire, 2001), and reductions in medications for behaviour
control (Hart & Noble, 2003).

13 An example from my experience as a practitioner will highlight how
particular intervention practices (in this case, an over-reliance on imperative
15 communication systems) can initiate, rather than alleviate, communicative hur-
dles. I was recently introduced to Colin, an adult deafblind man, who had been
17 given some ‘objects of reference’ by the staff who supported him: a cup to re-
present drink, a fork to represent dinner, a piece of a puzzle to represent table-top
19 activities, etc. Before every activity, he was given the associated object of
reference as an indication of what was about to happen. Staff reported that they
21 felt Colin did not understand what any of the objects represented, nor did he
ever expressively use them, for example by bringing an object to them as if he
23 were making a choice of what to do. They took this widespread lack to mean
that he had a comprehensive communication impairment. I was asked to observe
25 the interchange between Colin and staff, and to make suggestions for improve-
ments. On my first afternoon, I made the following observations: at 12.05
27 Colin came from his room and stood at the kitchen door; at 2.30 he stood at the
patio door; at 3.00 when a female staff member came on shift, he followed
29 her around and then stood next to the activities table; at 4.55 he came from
his bedroom and stood at the kitchen door; at 5.30 he took a staff member
31 towards the cupboard where his jacket was kept. These could all be viewed
as attempts to communicate. For example, by standing at the kitchen door,
33 Colin might well have been asking something about lunch; by taking a staff
member to his jacket, he could have been asking to go for a walk. When I
35 discussed my observations with staff, they explained that they had not recog-
nized his actions as communication bids, because they were expecting him to use
37 his ‘agreed’ object of reference. But Colin’s actions seemed to be clearly de-
manding some response from the people in his world. That is, they seemed to be
39 communicative. This was not, however, communication as a system for
delivering (possible) particular messages (‘I want to go for a walk’), but as an
41 invitation to interact, to be together, to experience ‘joyful togetherness’ (Nafstad
& Rødbroe, 1997, p. 170). Staff had missed the invitations Colin was issuing
43 because they had not come in the expected form.

45 Over the next few weeks, I introduced Colin, and the staff, to a different type of
‘intervention’ and communicative responsiveness. My aim was simply to connect
47 with Colin—about any topic that interested him, rather than about circumscribed
topics contained within preordained ‘objects of reference’. My approach to com-
municating with him depended heavily on the principles of contingency,
49 co-action, and especially imitation (Lee & MacWilliams, 1995; Nafstad &
Rødbroe, 1999; Nind & Hewitt, 1994). Such co-creation would help Colin to
51 experience himself as ‘seen’ within our interactions—and thus within his own
self-image and his world (Rødbroe & Souriau, 2000). For example, during one

1 session Colin brought a tower-building puzzle to the table. He built up the tower
2 and then knocked it down. I did the same: built up the tower and then proceeded
3 to knock it down. This 'game' was repeated many times over the next 20 minutes
4 by the two of us. At occasional moments Colin would make vocal sounds and I
5 always imitated these, sometimes directly as a sound from me but other times
6 with me imitating the contour of the vocalization by tracing a movement onto
7 Colin's arm. Additionally during the game Colin moved his fingers on the table,
8 and this action too was imitated by me. On another visit Colin came to sit next to
9 me in the garden. He made a vocal sound as he sat down and this was imitated
10 me, which led to subsequent vocalizations that were also imitated by me (again,
11 both as a vocalization and as a movement). He touched my hand, and he
12 stroked my arm, all of which were reciprocated by me. This session ultimately
13 led to Colin moving very close to me and giving me a hug. The fact that that
14 exchange was not sending a message of particular content seemed irrelevant in
15 the face of the togetherness we were both experiencing. Infant theory tells us
16 that it is on the basis of such shared experience that Colin's abilities to send more
17 sophisticated messages, and indeed jointly negotiate meaning for objects of
18 reference, might develop. But this required his carers to change their own modes
19 of communicating and in this instance I can report they proved very adept
20 at doing so.

23 KEY FUNCTIONS OF IMITATION

25 In this final section, I wish to examine why my imitative responses should have
26 had the effect on Colin that they did. In particular, I want to draw attention to
27 four key functions that imitation plays in facilitating communicative exchanges
28 between deafblind individuals and their partners, or, indeed, within human
29 partnerships generally. That exploration will illuminate the links between inter-
30 vention approaches and theory about infant communication, and this will help to
31 define the challenges that, in my view, are now most pressing for the future of the
32 deafblind field.

33 One primary function of imitation is that of attracting attention. This can
34 be seen, for example, in the actions of Fiona, an adult woman with no visual
35 or hearing capacities whatsoever. In one of the videotapes made of her
36 interactions with her carer, Ian, he can be observed tapping a rhythm onto her
37 outstretched hand (Hart & Noble, 2003). She, however, takes hold of Ian's
38 hand, and briefly squeezes it, then goes on to rub her own hands vigorously
39 up and down his hands. He imitates this action onto Fiona's hand. She
40 pauses, and then repeats the rubbing movement, which is again imitated by
41 Ian. This exchange continues for several rounds, with Fiona (and Ian) staying
42 very engaged, as each time the act they have just offered is imitated by
43 their partner.

45 This example captures one of imitation's strengths: it is a powerful mechanism
46 for obtaining, sustaining, and even regaining interpersonal togetherness
47 (Heimann, 2002; Meltzoff & Moore, 1998; Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1997). This is
48 arguably because it allows the deafblind person to be the 'undoubted object of
49 another person's attention' (Zeedyk, this volume). Imitation provides a confi-
50 dence—an immediate confidence—that the person is being noticed and respon-
51 ded to by their partner. The exchange between Fiona and Ian resembles the classic
intersubjective exchanges of parents and infants (Beebe, Jaffe, Feldstein, Mays, &
Alson, 1985; Trevarthen, 1979, 1980, 1998; Tronick, Als, & Adamson, 1979),

1 highlighting particularly their imitative, mirroring qualities (Meltzoff & Moore,
3 1998; Stern, 1985). Indeed, Kugiumutzakis (1998) has argued that the primary role
5 served by imitation between parents and infants is that of initiating intersub-
7 jective communication.

9 The techniques now being disseminated internationally throughout deafblind
11 support programmes foreground this function of imitation, drawing heavily on
13 infant theory to support their stance. For example, the approaches of Intensive
15 Interaction (Nind & Hewitt, 1994, 2001; Caldwell, 2002, 2005), CONTACT
17 (Janssen, Riksen-Walvaren, & van Dijk, 2003; Janssen, 2003; van den Tillart,
19 2001) and Co-creative Communication (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1999) highlight im-
21 itation's effectiveness in acting as an 'elicitor of social interest' (Nadel & Pezé,
23 1993). Any behavioural act is regarded as having communicative potential, and
25 practitioners are encouraged to respond to acts as such. Microanalysis of
27 communicative exchanges, initially developed as a research technique for
29 working with parents and infants, has now been developed into an intervention
31 technique that enables practitioners to observe and refine their own actions
33 so that communicative episodes can be sustained (Daelman, Nafstad, Rødbroe,
35 Visser, & Souriau, 1996; Janssen, 2003; Jenkins & Noble, 2002; Hart, 2001a, b).
37 While this entails identifying and explaining the points at which communication
39 breaks down, more fundamentally it means looking at the videotapes for ways
41 in which the interest of a partner has been retained through the use of imitative
43 responses. As we saw in the account of Fiona and Ian, the lasting theme of
45 the interaction—rubbing hands—was based on actions that came from within
47 the repertoire of the deafblind person. Lasting exchanges begin by the partner
49 responding to those actions, not by introducing extraneous ones. While an in-
51 teraction may (and indeed will need to, if it is to be successful and sustained)
move on to the point where the partner can introduce novel acts and themes
(Rødbroe & Souriau, 2000), this cannot be the case at the outset. The initial
exchanges must be based on acts that already exist within the repertoire of
the deafblind person. This is because acts that fall outside their repertoire hold
no meaning for them. It is meaningful acts that have the potential to become
shared acts.

33 A second key function of imitation is to stimulate turn-taking. This can be seen
35 in videotapes of Serge, who is a teenager with extremely impaired visual and
37 hearing capacities. In one episode, Serge is meeting two adults for the first time
39 (Daelman *et al.*, 1996). One of them, Anne, claps her hands in front of Serge's face
41 (because she has previously been told this is something he likes), so that he is able
43 to see and hear the action. Serge imitates this by clapping onto the adult's out-
45 stretched hands. A turn-taking sequence emerges as the adult now retrieves her
47 hands, and claps again onto Serge's hands, and Serge once again imitates the
49 action.

43 It is easy to see, in this episode, how the repetition of an act by a partner
45 naturally creates a turn-taking exchange. Turn-taking is a quality that has, of
47 course, been shown to be central to parent–infant interactions (Stern, 1985; Stern,
49 Jaffe, Beebe, & Bennett, 1974; Trevarthen, 1979, 1980). However, attempting to
51 describe an exchange in narrative form, as I have here, may make it sound like
clear demarcations can be identified between the contributions of each partner.
This is far from the case. For example, at a point later in the interaction, Serge and
Anne join hands, rubbing the tips of each other's fingers. Towards the end of the
sequence they take hold of one another's hands and begin jumping up and down
together. There is no clear 'you do this and then I'll do that' rhythm; instead their
actions have begun to overlap; they have created a joint, shared activity—indeed

1 a shared 'topic'. The synchrony and reciprocity (Stern, 1985; Trevarthen, 1980)
3 represented within such shared activity is being given priority in work within the
5 deafblind field, for as Nafstad and Rødbroe (1997, p. 169) suggest, 'the critical
7 strategies in the process of this patterning refer to the system of being imitated
9 and imitation'.

11 A third key function of imitation is that it allows partners to recognize
13 each other. Videotapes of interactions between Fiona and myself (Hart, 2001a;
15 Hart & Noble, 2001, 2003) over the course of one year reveal patterns that
17 are frequently repeated, such as rhythmic tapping of her fingers, hands, wrists,
19 elbows and shoulder. Over time, these patterns built into a greeting ritual, a way
21 of saying hello. The reverse movements (tapping shoulders, elbow, wrist,
23 hand and finally fingers) became a way of saying goodbye. This is a common
25 feature in the deafblind world (Hart, 2001b; Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1999) and is
27 one way that the deafblind person can know with whom he/she is interacting.
29 However, such ways of recognizing someone do not have to emerge slowly
31 over time. I recall observing a colleague giving a foot massage to a deafblind
33 woman, which involved responding imitatively to foot and leg movements
35 shown by the woman. One week later when this colleague again visited, she
37 went over to introduce herself to the woman, whose immediate response was to
39 lift her foot up towards my colleague's hands! Was she double-checking that this
41 really was the same person as the previous week—the woman who will massage
43 my feet? Such a phenomenon is strongly reminiscent of Meltzoff and Moore's
45 experimental work in which infants, as young as 6-weeks old, use imitative
47 games to check the identity of the person in front of them by bringing back
49 actions from previous meetings (Meltzoff, 2002). If greeting and goodbye rituals
51 become part of the communicative repertoire between two partners, then they
help lead the way to more general negotiation of shared meaning (Nafstad & Rødbroe, 1999).

One final, and profound, function of imitation is the crafting of morality. Meltzoff (2002) suggests that the moral mind, which asks you to treat your neighbour as yourself, could not develop without imitation. This is because, to the human infant, 'another person is not an alien but a kindred spirit—not an 'It' but an embryonic 'Thou' (Meltzoff, 2002). This relation can be seen particularly sharply in exchanges between deafblind adults and partners. For the deafblind person, receiving an imitative response from another person helps that deafblind person to see themselves, to experience themselves as an 'I', even after years of being neglected within social interactions. Moreover, for the partner, imitation helps to reveal the deafblind person as a 'Thou', thus endowing the deafblind person with a humanity that is often rendered invisible. Imitation is therefore serving the same purpose for the seeing-hearing partner as it serves for a newborn infant: it shows the other to be just like me (Meltzoff & Moore, 1998; Nadel, 2002). This realization opens the door to many new communicative possibilities, with increased competencies for both partners (Rødbroe & Souriau, 2000). If, as Nadel (2002) suggests, 2-month-olds perceive the act of being imitated as a contingent social behaviour, to which they give a social answer, then this aspect of humanity can be released at any age. Its establishment is not confined to early developmental stages. When you are together with another person and they imitate you, you feel an almost impossible-to-ignore compulsion to give an answer. This is perhaps the real power of imitation for intervention efforts: it weaves its spell as powerfully on the communication partner as it does on the deafblind person (Heimann, 2002; Nadel, 2002; Trevarthen, 1980).

1 THE WAY AHEAD

3 The deafblind field has reached an exciting turning point in the last two decades
5 with the search for a 'natural' language for congenitally deafblind people now a
7 clear focus. This is undoubtedly made difficult by the fact that a natural tactile
9 language has never developed anywhere in the world (Vonen & Nafstad, 1999),
11 yet new approaches of the type I have been describing in this paper are emerging:
13 approaches that foreground intersubjectivity and mutual engagement. There are
15 of course many institutions and practitioners throughout the world who will
endorse alternative ways of working, due sometimes to historical tendencies,
sometimes to well articulated theoretical frameworks, and sometimes out of a
lack of awareness of alternative approaches. In my view, this results in three
predominant approaches that practitioners continue to adopt when seeking to
engage in communicative partnerships with those deafblind people who may
have had limited opportunities to communicate with others.

- 17 (1) They may be overly concerned with language acquisition. They set out to
19 teach various representational systems before an intersubjective state is
21 established between themselves and their communication partners. With
23 young children, practitioners will understand well the need to start at the
beginning of the communication process, but with adults it is perhaps easier
to overlook this step. Nevertheless it is essential. All journeys must start at
the beginning and imitation provides that essential first step.
- 25 (2) Some practitioners might start at the beginning and use techniques such as
27 Intensive Interaction, with imitation at its root, to build up trust and rela-
29 tionship and achieve high levels of intersubjectivity. However, it is easy to
31 think of that as the final destination—primary intersubjectivity or affective
attunement is where it's at! Rødbroe and Souriau (2000) are right to point out
that rich communication experiences can be created if the developmental
journey does end at this point for some individuals. However, they are cor-
rect too to note that practitioners should remain watchful for further oppor-
tunities to extend people's communicative abilities into language.
- 33 (3) Some practitioners might endorse the possibility of language development,
35 following the establishment of primary intersubjectivity, but then apply the-
37 oretical models that describe standard development. The literature is awash
with concepts such as scaffolding, guided participation, and assisted per-
formance, all of which pre-suppose that the more competent communication
partner is leading the other to their preferred language destination. But the
model of primary intersubjectivity that I have been discussing here is not one
of guidance; it is one of a joint journey.

41 So a journey of mutual discovery is emerging as a fourth approach within the
43 deafblind field and this journey may ultimately lead to the 'natural language' of
45 congenitally deafblind people. I have provided elsewhere (Hart, 2003) a discus-
47 sion about the role of the partner in communication episodes with a deafblind
49 person, which calls for a re-evaluation of the scaffolding metaphor in the de-
scription of communication development for deafblind people. There is a grow-
ing sense in deafblind education that a two-fold Zone of Proximal Development
is needed (Brown, 2001), suggesting a level of symmetry that asks the commu-
nication partner to perceive the world from a deafblind perspective. Practitioners
need to cease occupying the role of guide, leading the way so that deafblind
51 people might reach our language destinations. That pedagogical model is

1 essentially the same as the one in operation 150 years ago, regardless of any
 3 sophistication we may have brought to our teaching implements. Rather, prac-
 5 titioners need to become fellow travellers, jointly negotiating meaning from the
 7 actions, gestures and vocalizations that develop whilst being together with our
 9 deafblind partners (Hart, 2003). The journey is one of mutual discovery, and its
 starting place for deafblind people is the same as it was for each of us as infants: a
 companion space where imitation acts as a powerful and immediate source of
 feedback about your value as a fellow human being.

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