

## **Dialogicality in culture**

### **Response from the perspective of congenital deafblindness**

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Listening to Colwyn is, at one and the same time, both common-sensical and grounded but also inspirational and forward-thinking. For us in the field of congenital deafblindness, I think it helps us realise there are so many things that we already do well, but at the same time it gives us a great number of future challenges.

There are many more things we could consider. So Inger and I have faced a dilemma - Do we only focus on one aspect? Or instead do we summarise a large number of aspects that need to be considered in communication partnerships with congenitally deafblind people? We have decided on a compromise approach, where we will outline a few aspects that perhaps we as practitioners need to think about in our day-to-day interactions with deafblind people, but we will then focus in more detail on two of these topics and illustrate these with stories, videos and photographs. The first job of doing the summary will fall to Paul and the more detailed analysis will come from Inger.

We will of course relate our thinking to the ideas presented by Colwyn Trevarthen and let us first cast our minds back to the time of the initial Paris conferences from the Communication Network in the 1990s.

Colwyn presented at the second of these conferences in 1999 and already at that time, he was thinking and writing about culture and how children learn about culture. He rejected simple ideas that this process was just about the 'socialisation' of children. It is not about suppressing

*'the originally egocentric motives of individuals who are forced to change because they have to live together and take in other people's ideas, and obey the society's established rules. Infants, who are innate companions and co-operators, show us the need for a more positive theory.'*

**(Trevarthen, Colwyn (1995) 'The child's need to learn a culture' in *Children and Society*, 9(1))**

**And this more positive theory places 'culture' right in the centre of the developmental process and it is no surprise that this is where we start this conference. We should also bear in mind Michael Cole's comments that**

*'...culture is a medium not an independent variable...'*

**(Cole, M (1998) 'Culture in development' in Woodhead, M., Faulkner, D. and Littleton, K (eds) *Cultural Worlds of Early Childhood*, London, Routledge).**

**In other words, it matters greatly what culture you are raised in. It isn't just an add-on – culture is absolutely central to development and will have a direct impact on your development.**

- **This will be the first of the aspects that Inger looks at in more detail, when she illustrates what differences might come about if you are congenitally deafblind and raised in East Africa or in countries such as France, Denmark or Scotland. Does this make a difference? And what are any benefits or drawbacks for people born deafblind? We will come back to this shortly.**

**However, first let us explore culture in more detail.**

Ellen Dessinayake has written a brilliant book called *Art and Intimacy* where, similar to Trevarthen, she speaks about the rhythms and modes that underpin human nature. She outlines five outcomes of this, which become both needs and possibilities for all humans:

- 1) Mutuality
- 2) Belonging
- 3) Meaning-making
- 4) Developing competence- in using artefacts and tools
- 5) Elaborating

As Dessinayake leads us towards this idea of elaborating, she is helping us to understand that the arts, this desire not just to make sense of the world, and manipulate it, but to change it, to adorn it, to make it full of wonder, is a fundamental human drive. She considers that this creative spark lives within us all and, of course, this sits comfortably with Trevarthen's most recent publication 'Communicative Musicality', where he, and many other writers, illustrate the importance of rhythm, music

and narrative structures as the fundamental basis of human communication.

These discussions lead us to further aspects of culture that would be worth exploring, although we will not have sufficient time to explore all of these today, but you can bring them into your discussions at coffee breaks etc. They may also act as prompts for some of your deliberations this afternoon in the video analysis sessions.

- 1) Does the creative spark burn just as brightly for congenitally deafblind people? If so, how would we recognise this and support its development? Is it present in the interactions characterised as primary intersubjectivity, where we see the range of rhythms and music that Trevarthen speaks about; we see novelty and surprise; and we see people's expressive narrative possibilities. We in the deafblind field are very familiar with such interactions and Booklet 2 is full of examples. (1972 Santa Monica Jazz Festival – Ella Fitzgerald has fabulous improvisatory skills – deafblind people have exactly these same skills!)
- 2) How do we support congenitally deafblind people to learn more about, and indeed gain access to the wider 'culture' around them? We know of many examples of deafblind people participating in the Arts, in music, in drama but how can we make this kind of cultural access a day-to-day reality for everyone? Another question for you this week.

Throughout this conference you will see lots of videos that illustrate both the Arts but also everyday activities, so we do not intend to look at these closely here. The Arts, the outdoors, everyday activities are all just as

possible for congenitally deafblind people and indeed the Arts allow one of situation where deafblind and non-deafblind people can actually relate to each other on an equal plane.

But we can go further still in this regard, in two different but related areas, the first of which widens the previous questions about access to creative culture; the second of which narrows the focus.

First, the wider question, where we look not just at narrow definitions of culture, as the Arts, music etc, but any aspect of the world and relationships with people in that world.

1) How do deafblind people get access to other people's perspectives on the world? For example, how do they know how that other people eat just as they do; how do they know that friendships and relationships might be possible for them; how do they know about hobbies and interests they might take up; how do they know about traditions and events that take place in their culture? But equally, how we can move towards the culture of the deafblind person. David Goode (another who has spoken at previous conferences here in Paris) writes about a young deafblind girl who doesn't see a tambourine necessarily as a musical instrument, but as an object that has many other uses. Similarly, I can think of a video where David, a music worker in Sense Scotland, is engaged in a music session with a deafblind teenager. A guitar is placed between them and David is strumming chords onto the guitar. The girl, however, taps a rhythm onto the body of the guitar and David immediately follows this rhythm – so a guitar is now not only a musical instrument that can be strummed, it can be played like a drum. (Many composers in recent

years have made alterations to traditional musical instruments so that they use what they might call a 'prepared piano' – where the strings are strummed, hit with hammers, you play rhythms onto the piano lid etc etc. These composers get fabulous amounts of money from Arts funding bodies and rightly they become famous – but congenitally deafblind people might have been there for years and years – they are, as in so many other areas, leading the way!)

Now the more focussed question:

2) How do deafblind people get access to the wider linguistic culture that is all around them? To know that language is a cultural tool available to humans?

**Since the focus of this conference is communication, perhaps this question is the most important of all and so that is why Inger will also consider it in some detail with a consideration of one example in practice. This will allow us to think about how congenitally deafblind children might journey towards language. What is the cultural impact there? Cole writes:**

***'...culturally organised joint activity that incorporates the child into the scene as a novice participant is one necessary ingredient in language acquisition'***

(Cole, Michael (1992) *Developmental Psychology: An Advanced Textbook* Hillsdale, NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates)

So some interesting questions there for communication partnerships involving congenitally deafblind people. Traditionally when thinking about communication and language development, we think of learning the language(s) used by others in the wider cultural community. So for example, in Scotland we may think about how young children make the journey to being a native English speaker. Or if the child is profoundly deaf and raised in a signing environment, we may think about how they journey towards British Sign Language (BSL). If however, we bear in mind that any person learning a language needs the perceptual abilities to perceive the language(s) around them and they need to learn from people who already are fluent in the language(s) (we learned that from Vonen at the conference in Oslo in 2006), then a significant challenge arises for congenitally deafblind people. They do not have the perceptual abilities to acquire spoken or even visually signed languages, due to their hearing and visual impairments. Neither can they find communication partners who are fluent in tactile communication, because none truly exists.

This leaves an exciting question, which is at the heart of this conference and the work in the deafblind field: how do people journey towards a language that arguably does not yet exist? This question provides an opportunity to think differently about how languages might develop and about the roles played by both communication partners in this process. And consequently it allows us to return to that quotation from Cole and ask which *culturally organised joint activities* will act as the necessary ingredient in the language acquisition process for congenitally deafblind people?

In exploring this question, it is important to state that both partners bring different gifts, different contributions and different perspectives on the world around them to their communicative meeting places. Sacks (1995) suggests 'when we open our eyes each morning, it is upon a world we have spent a lifetime learning to see'. For congenitally deafblind people, in contrast, 'when they stretch out their hands each morning, it is upon a world they have spent a lifetime learning to feel'.

The congenitally deafblind person is skilled at perceiving the world from a tactile perspective, whereas the non-deafblind partner is not necessarily so. However, the non-deafblind partner is already skilled in at least one language whereas the congenitally deafblind person is not necessarily so. This is important, and if we return for a moment to the previous conference in Leeds 2008, where Markova gave us a definition of dialogicality as the fundamental human capacity to 'conceive, create and communicate about social realities in terms of the Other', we can see then that both partners have something to learn from the other and this raises questions addressed to both. How can I learn to perceive the world from your perspective? How can I learn aspects of your communication and language strategies that will help shape my experiences into communication and language strategies that we both understand?

The dialogical framework asks us to see the Other and to move closer to that person's perspective on the world. Since the congenitally deafblind person cannot journey to the communication partner's perceptual perspective on the world (vision and hearing), it is incumbent on the partner to move into the tactile world and that is why touch takes centre stage in our work. In using touch as a primary medium for interacting



with the world, however, non-deafblind partners are simply re-engaging with a sense and a skill that they already possess.

So when considering the creation of languages in a new modality, languages in the tactile medium, we can no longer focus on the congenitally deafblind partner as the only learner. So 'scaffolding' metaphors to describe language development are perhaps not the most accurate. The non-deafblind communication partner, traditionally seen as the more competent other, is just as much the learner in two different, but related, spheres:

- a) They are learning what it is to perceive the world primarily from the tactile perspective;
- b) They themselves are learning a new tactile language.

So a clearer model is required, one that will explain the relationship that exists between congenitally deafblind people and their non-deafblind partners. Perhaps 'co-creative communication' is a good first candidate (Nafstad and Rødbroe, 1999). It is true that this draws on the concept of 'scaffolding', and this might strongly suggest that the non-deafblind partner is the more competent. However, the adjective 'co-creating' captures a sense that both partners are learning from and contributing to this process.

Rødbroe and Souriau (2000) suggest one role for the non-deafblind partner is to discover and support new emerging competencies and this suggests that the deafblind person is the guide. They do further suggest, in an echo of Bruner's suggestion that a teacher should 'lead by

following' (Wood, 1998), that the partner should be sensitive to the contributions of the deafblind person, willing to both lead and be led.

If both have a learning role, then it follows that both have a teaching role.

The partnership model that underlies this thesis, indeed the dialogical framework, would suggest that both partners bring their complete selves to communicative exchanges. Does this mean non-deafblind partners should bring their own languages even though they might be inaccessible to their deafblind partner? Does it mean tactile movements and gestures brought by the deafblind person should be the sole basis for any subsequent languages that are developed? In answering these questions, we must heed Markova's warning not to subvert striving for agency, striving to be recognised as an individual, in our desire to achieve intersubjectivity and negotiate meanings (Markova, 2008). To me, this suggests that it is entirely appropriate for non-deafblind partners to bring their own linguistic and cultural experiences as long as these are adapted to the tactile medium, and to find creative ways of making sure that language (in its widest sense) is all around. However, if that is all they bring it is going to be a one-sided affair because this would minimise the contributions brought by the deafblind person. People, objects, places and events should not simply be understood and referred to through contributions brought by the non-deafblind partner, but equally understood and referred to through contributions brought by the deafblind partner.

We are venturing then towards the kind of double-sided ZPD described by Brown at a previous Paris conference in 2001, where in any interaction there is a ZPD for the deafblind partner and a parallel ZPD for

the non-deafblind partner? One is learning and contributing just as equally as the other. So it is not about imposing language from outside, whichever partner attempts to impose it.

In my own research at the moment I am using a model developed by Vasu Reddy, another student of Colwyn Trevarthen's, where she describes how partners expand their awareness of the objects of the other's attention. This model takes us from those early dyadic interactions and establishes a journey that travels beyond the here-and-now. Firstly, both partners are able to respond to and direct attention to self, then what self does, then what self perceives and finally what self remembers. As this expansion takes place, these partnerships develop jointly understood and jointly perceived ways of referring to 'past events and absent targets' (Reddy, 2003).

So, both partners must expand their awareness of the objects of the other's attention and this must happen in the tactile medium. As congenitally deafblind partners do this, they move further and further away from the here-and-now and as they do this they are moving towards the linguistic culture of their non-deafblind partners. As non-deafblind partners do this, they move deeper and deeper into a tactile perspective on the world.

Partnerships involving deafblind people can develop language but the starting place for any such languages must clearly be at a common touchpoint, one that lies within the perceptual experience of both partners. Both partners must develop a fluency in perceiving the world from a tactile perspective. Yet at the same they must bring their existing cultural and linguistic experiences to such communicative meeting

places. For non-deafblind partners, this will mean bringing elements of any existing languages that they have, particularly tactile adaptations of visual sign languages, since these are closer to the experience of a congenitally deafblind person than spoken words can ever be. For congenitally deafblind partners it means bringing movements and gestures that emerge from participation in a wide range of activities.

So we will get to questions about language later in this presentation, but first we wish to turn our attention to the impacts of different cultural backgrounds on development.

**Paul: So Inger, you have traveled around the world. Will you share your experiences on cultural learning in other cultures?**

I agree that it is interesting for us to share and to learn from other cultures. As partners of deafblind persons I think we can learn from cultures that are closer to the bodily culture of deafblind persons - and today we actually have many deafblind children from other cultures in our services.

Therefore I would like to share my experiences from East Africa where I have been working for 15 years as a consultant. That is in deafblind school units in Uganda, Kenya and Tanzania.

### **First encounters with deafblind children in Africa**

The most striking experiences I had from my first encounters with deafblind children in Africa are as follows. They are striking because they are different from my experiences in western deafblind services.

- Contact is easy to obtain and that includes contact with strangers

- Tactile contact and interaction with hands and other body parts are not vulnerable. In fact I have never met a deafblind child in Africa with - what we call - tactile defensiveness.
- And the children spontaneously interact with each other. They play together, they teach each other skills, they collaborate, and they comfort each other. This is rarely seen in western deafblind services.

### **Characteristics of the African culture**

The families of the deafblind African children did not have any guidance from deafblind specialists till the children were enrolled in the new school programs. Therefore the social and cultural learning I observed had to be part of the social and cultural learning in Africa.

I think that these cultural factors make the African culture match aspects that are essential for deafblind persons:

- Infants are carried in a kanga (a piece of cloth) on the body of their mother till they can walk - and they sleep with their mother. Their innate intersubjectivity is answered by contingent sympathetic bodily responses by their mother. Being responded to creates pride – and it facilitates other directedness, subjectivity and agency in the child. Bodily mother and child can share and regulate emotions. They can share small emotional narratives many times during the day and in addition the child gets a lot of spatial experiences, when he follows his mother's working body.
- In the African culture movements and emotions are expressed with intense and distinct bodily rhythms, which promotes the social, emotional and mental processes and exchanges. We act, we think,

we imagine, and remember in movements -rhythm and narrative structure promotes these processes.

- The cultural habitus - (how social practice is organized in a culture) is not only learned from parents - the whole family and siblings play a major role in the social and cultural learning.
- Touch is cultural accepted. In African countries it is for instance common to eat with the hands.
- As a result of the hot climate, the body is not wrapped up in a lot of clothes and thereby available for information and contact. Children often walk barefooted. And the climate offers many opportunities to teach outside the classroom in more natural activities.
- Natural materials are more tactually interesting. Landmarks in the environment are already there, and the smells are neither perfumed or wrapped up in plastic. Many activities do not have to be created. The family members collaborate on all the daily activities and deafblind children can be included in these activities. Their contributions are highly appreciated and needed in for instance fetching water, cleaning, preparing food, feeding the animals or in farming or gardening.

### **Cross-cultural studies:**

Many cross-cultural studies confirm the effect of these cultural factors in East Africa.

Le Vine and le Vine observed Kenyan and American mothers interacting with their infants when they were 4 and 10 months old. The rank order of the immediate maternal responses to the initiative of the child are:

<b>4months:</b>		<b>10 months</b>	
<b>Gusii</b>	<b>Boston</b>	<b>Gusii</b>	<b>Boston</b>
touch	look	hold	look
talk	talk	touch	talk
look	touch	look	feed/nurse
feed/nurse	feed/nurse	feed/nurse	touch

Holding and touch are more frequent in the responses of the African mothers - and they respond quicker than the American mothers.

This tendency is even more evident at the age of 10 months where look and talk takes more and more over in western cultures.

Gussi mothers first of all intend to calm their children and make them feel secure – or in building up trust in the relationship.

The Boston mothers play with their children to support further development

The different maternal style indicates the difference in cultural goals and in the socioeconomic backgrounds of the mothers.

The 3 following tables offer more detailed data and they illustrate the tendency even more.

The are average numbers of maternal responses to cries at the age of 4 and 10months:

**Gusii 4 (10)**

Talk 10 (7)  
 Look 3 (5)  
 Touch 20 (20)  
 Hold 44 (33)  
 Feed 9 (3)

**Boston 4 (10)**

Talk 21 (29)  
 Look 22 (29)  
 Touch 8 (3)  
 Hold 30 (23)  
 Feed 2 (7)

The are average numbers of maternal responses to vocalisations at the age of 4 and 10months:

**Gusii 4 (10)**

Talk 10 (5)  
 Look 4 (2)  
 Touch 9 (8)  
 Hold 51 (18)  
 Feed 4 (1)

**Boston 4 (10)**

Talk 19 (20)  
 Look 31 (29)  
 Touch 5 (2)  
 Hold 26 (10)  
 Feed 2 (1)

The are average numbers of maternal responses to looks at the age of 4 and 10months:

**Gusii 4 (10)**

Talk 19 (12)  
 Look 19 (7)  
 Touch 28 (22)  
 Hold 88 (31)  
 Feed 1 (1)

**Boston 4 (10)**

Talk 25 (25)  
 Look 37 (29)  
 Touch 4 (2)  
 Hold 18 (8)  
 Feed 2 (4)

These data confirm that the African culture is closer to what we can imagine could be a natural deafblind environment than the culture of western cultures.



The studies of Wood from 1988 investigate the question: How children think and learn in different cultures later in their development.

Wood's research illustrates how the African culture much more focus on hands on guiding than on verbal instructions than we do in western countries.

Focus is very much on teaching practical skills and siblings act as teachers.

Ainsworth studies from the 60ties in Baganda in Uganda find that African children have:

- earlier motor milestones
- earlier attachment behaviour
- and attachment to more persons

Ainsworth too explains that these differences are a result of the close bodily contact in early development.

### **Video illustrations**

The first video illustrates a music/dancing session from a deafblind school unit in Uganda.

Deafblind students and their teachers perform a traditional African dance where the piece of clothes around the waist illustrates an essential artifact used when dancing.

I think this illustrates a cultural narration of vitality, which promotes private and shared happiness and the feeling of belonging to this group and to the Ugandan culture for all the participants.

The partners bring their personal and cultural ways of moving and singing, which influence the development of self and agency in the deafblind children. It can also be observed how the teachers use hands on to explain to the children how to move.

The next video sequence happens at Kabarnet School for the Deafblind in Kenya.

A deaf teacher and his student collaborate on planting seeds, which is going to be a part of the food in the deafblind school. It illustrates how the teacher transmits this cultural activity to his student

- later the first student with pride transmits his newly learned skill to another student.

The feeling of pride in knowledge and skills are important for developing self esteem and agency.

### **Cultural exchanges**

I do not intend to make a romantic picture of the African culture and congenital deafblindness - as that is certainly not the whole truth.

I just want to point to cultural factors in Africa and in other developing countries that deafblind partners in western countries can reflect on and learn from - and maybe recognize when they meet deafblind children from other cultures in their services.

It seems that the African culture is very good for supporting basic communication, social cooperation in practical tasks and for peer interaction. However, it is much more difficult when it comes to sharing thoughts and to sharing a narrative in a dialogue.

The African teaching methods used to develop communication further tend to be directive and adult goal oriented - a tendency we also have to focus on in our services.

**Paul: Lets address the question: how is it possible for a deafblind child to enter the linguistic culture.**

I will illustrate this question with one case I have followed for many years – a case where Santeri - a congenital deafblind deafblind child - has entered the linguistic culture.

How has it been possible for Santeri – who is now nine years old - to develop a fluent tactile sign language? Can we learn from the intervention strategies used to support his development or are his preconditions for acquiring language exceptional?

***The preconditions:*** Santeri is born blind with light perception caused by microphthalmia. He is congenital deaf on both ears and his acoustic nerves only work partly.

No indications of motor problems or mental retardation have ever been observed.

Santeri's parents are and have always been very competent partners who from Santeri's birth and on forth have engaged in relationship of high quality with their son. They have resources to search for relevant information and to make choices that have support Santeri's learning conditions.

***Reflecting back I think these are some of the important issues of intervention:***

- From very early childhood his residual senses were systematically stimulated in a playful manner. Technical aids like transparent shell prostheses and cochlear implant was used within the first year of life. These intervention strategies meant that Santeri was fully aware that something was happening outside his own body – even though the visual and auditory information were very limited.

- The preconditions for language acquisition were established and developed in playful togetherness with his parents. Reciprocity in social interaction, joint attention and referential gestures followed the milestones of seeing hearing children - but were of course established bodily.
- From the age of 8 months Santeri was simultaneously exposed to Finnish speech and sign language in all daily activities, as intersubjectivity was very stable.

Santeri's parents and his partner in his day care were fluent signers and developed – learning from Santeri - as competent tactile communicators. The parents organised access to experts on deafblind communication, and supervision was offered on a regular basis. This was especially important for identifying when Santeri indicated that changes were needed in the intervention strategies, and for identifying what these changes should be.

These are the three main strategies that both the family and the supervisors consider to have been important:

- Adapting and scaffolding the critical learning formats of ordinary children at the right time - or in other words to adapt these cultural learning formats to Santeri's communicative development and to his bodily senses.
- Within these formats Santeri has been leading in designing his own learning conditions based on his bodily expertise - and in when changes were needed.

- The partners have followed Santeri's design and have used their knowledge and experiences to expand the learning conditions he created. Thereby they added their cultural knowledge, the designs of tactile exchanges and their cultural language.

### **Video example:**

The video example illustrates a well-known learning format the **read-a - book** format. Santeri is two years old on the video clip.

In this example the adult's design is to create and scaffold this format for Santeri. The book or here picture must be tactile. It must be based on shared events - or aspects from their overlapping context within the event. These shared aspects from the event offer options for co-reference.

The partner follows Santeri's design, which is based on his bodily expertise, and she expands - whenever possible - with her cultural language, the cultural tactile body positioning - face to face - and the cultural tactile exchanges with talking and listening hands, and she expands on aspects she thinks are part of Santeri's experience.

Santeri designs the position, which at that time was being in front of the adult to get as much bodily information as possible.

The way the exchanges happen changes all the time during these few minutes – following the intervention strategy: always to sign in the most efficient and possible way - whenever it is possible to map the language to Santeri's attention.

The exchanges consist of conventional signs, referential gestures and emotions from both partners and speech from his mother - and the dialogue is reciprocal.

Santeri and his mother co-author a conversation about going to the giraffe park, which is a nearby playground.

They talk about the giraffe slide, sitting on the giraffe swing, which had a big head and the pram which took Santeri and his brother Ero to the playground.

The conversation is very much controlled by both partners and the tactile picture supports the conversation.

Within this format the naming format is also included and dynamic repetitions are initiated by both of interesting aspects from the event.

***After the video:***

Santeri enjoyed this read-a-book format for a very long time and his partners worked very hard to produce tactile pictures of his most important life stories till the moment where he was able to follow the read-a-book format with ready made books for blind children - of course still close to his own experiences. Nowadays, he likes the fairy tales and stories of the Finnish culture.

There is no reason to believe that these learning formats differ for congenital deafblind children with additional disabilities, but in these cases partners need to scaffold more and for a longer period and often much later in life.

In many cases the deafblind natural way of communicating based on referential gestures will continue to be stronger than that of the linguistic culture of the partners.

The example with Santeri illustrated co-creating a cultural tactile language in relationships where both partners contribute and learn.

## Conclusion

And we will finish with a general question to the audience:

How can non-deafblind partners become more skilled at perceiving the world from a tactile perspective?

This takes us back to Cole's idea of culture as a medium and not a variable, because we can imagine also that a deafblind child's lack of hearing and sight can also be seen as a medium and not a variable - all information passes through here, so we should not view deafblindness as a negative state of being in which sight and hearing are not there but instead as a positive state in which touch is the pre-eminent source of information. How do partners meet this challenge? Again, there is a wealth of video footage to illustrate this and we will see much of this footage during this week.

If we wish to help congenitally deafblind people towards the wider culture and languages, then we must be willing to move towards the world of touch. You can discuss in your video analysis session, whether non-deafblind communication partners are able to do this successfully.