"It's about how we move together, and how we influence each other's practice": The actions in Action Research that helped build a SALTMusic community of practice

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Jessica Pitt
Royal College of Music
London, UK
Jessica.pitt@rcm.ac.uk

Abstract

This paper presents findings from a two-year action research project – SALTMusic - that combined the expertise from speech and language therapy and early childhood music practices, to develop a new pedagogical approach to working together with families with young children (aged two to four-years-old) with communication difficulties using music. At the heart of the project was communication. We became aware that words and talk have become more dominant in the world than the referents they stand for (Barad, 2007). Communication comprises more than words. Inter-action (in our case, musical inter-action) as described by Susan Blum (2015) was positioned as the primary signifier of communication in this project.

The first two research questions focused on how the two different professional disciplines combined their practices and understandings to form a community of practice, and to discover the characteristics of the new pedagogical approach that emerged as a result of their joint-working.

Action research was selected as the most useful design for the study. With an underlying tenet of influence or change (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2008), this philosophical position fitted well with the desire to discover a new pedagogy. Through interdisciplinary team-working changes in practice occurred through collaboration and the establishment of a self-critical community of practice (Pitt, Arculus & Fox, 2017). We adopted cyclical action research processes of: planning, acting, observing, reflecting, then planning afresh in the light of the discussions, then repeating the cycle (Schön, 1983). Five such cycles allowed for deepening reflections in and on action and opportunities to think about, amend and develop new pedagogical processes (Huhtinen-Hilden & Pitt, 2018). Using Etienne Wenger's (1998) three dimensions of practice required to form a community of practice: Mutual engagement, Joint Enterprise and Shared Repertoire, this paper describes and discusses the two-year joint-working process, the tools and artefacts that were influential in helping practitioners and parents metaphorically shift and move in their approach to interacting with children with communication difficulties. New ideas about young children's communication emerged. Co-delivery and reflecting together has resulted in a trans-disciplinary communicative approach that could be used in a variety of contexts.

Keywords

Introduction

This paper discusses a collaborative project that brought together the expertise of speech and language therapists with that of early childhood music-arts practitioners with the aim of developing new pedagogical approaches for working with children (between two to four years old) and their caregivers. This paper begins by outlining the research and theoretical terrain, followed by the methodological aspects, moving on to discuss the community of practice formation. I argue that the action research design was instrumental in the enablement of inter-disciplinarity rather than preserving distinction between the two disciplines of speech and language therapy and early childhood music-arts practice. It was the 'actions' or intra-actions (Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p.xiv) that intertwined the SALTMusic project. Metaphorical movements and shifts were required in the process of becoming a community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Similarly, the children and caregivers who attended the SALTMusic group activities moved and shifted in the ways that they interacted together in order for new forms of communication to be opened-up to them. As a result of this intermingling and interacting new musical pedagogical approaches have been found that liberated anxious parents and enabled children to communicate with capacity, being seen as competent and creative. The models of practice that have emerged can be seen to be trans-disciplinary, of benefit in a variety of communication contexts.

The dominance of talk

Language is an important system of rules that helps communicate our needs, wants and inner thoughts to others. Having a good vocabulary is seen as an important attribute alongside many other emerging skills of independence for a child about to start school. In some parts of UK around half the number of children start school with poor language and communication skills (Hartshorne, 2009). Words, or rather the word-gap, of some children when compared to others from different socio-economic strata in society, can begin to feel anything but neutral. Especially when the 'gap' is attributed to parenting and the home (Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2010). Erica Burman (2017) argues that being obsessed with getting children talking by immersing them in a language-rich environment has no clear rationale to support how this helps children to talk, nor what type of adult-directed talk is the most effective.

There is, Susan Blum (2015) suggests, a fixation on 'Wordism': Words are seen as the size of units that signify language, therefore more words are better, with the responsibility on parents to get their children using more words. Parents can feel anxious that their children are not using words, nor increasing their vocabulary, and they feel guilty and anxious about their children's development.

Reframing the territory

We decided to challenge this dominant 'Wordism' discourse by basing our

understanding of communication on Blum's findings from linguistic anthropologists, whose studies of other cultures suggest that *inter-action is* the first unit of language (Blum, 2017, p.8). From this perspective, children with communication difficulties might already possess varied, engaging interaction modes.

This understanding about language and communication is supported by the turn towards materialism of posthumanist feminist philosophy. Karen Barad (2007) suggests that language has had too much power in the world and that we should turn our attention to matter and materials, becoming more centred on the interconnectedness of everything to everything else. This notion was particularly relevant, not only for the children and their families who participated in our research but also the team members who came from two completely different disciplines and yet shared an interest and understanding about working with children with communication difficulties and their families. Conceiving of the whole project as an entanglement of connections enabled us to see the separate disciplines, the sounds, the materials, the space, the artefacts and the humans as interlinked. In this way we could think about an intra-active pedagogy (Lenz Taguchi, 2010), where boundaries blur between the human and the non-human and the latter helps shape human learning through the entanglement of all.

Networks and actors

Alan Prout (2011) suggests a framework for thinking about childhood (or perhaps 'humanhood') entitled ANT (actor-network-theory). His theoretical conceptualisation is of complex melanges of social, cultural and natural networks. Actors: human, non-human, artefacts, technologies, global companies or nations are connecting and disconnecting through stable and less stable intersections. Childhood has to be understood through and within the particular network in which it is produced.

This is an interesting frame for thinking about children with communication difficulties and their families. The various networks that may already be caught up with their being in the world may bring feelings of, for example difference, deficiency, separateness, and/ or specialness.

This study brought together artistic, sociological and medical (health) disciplines to explore and seek for common ground. By bringing together these actors /networks the hope was to contribute to "*understanding and constituting contemporary childhood society*" (Prout, 2011, p.9).

Community of Practice

One of the research questions of this study was to investigate how the two disciplines of speech and language therapy and music-arts practice combined and assembled their respective tools, knowledge, artefacts, practices and understandings about children and caregivers to become one community of practice (Wenger, 1998). Etienne Wenger (1998) suggests that we think about the growing togetherness as mediated through three different aspects:

- Mutual engagement
- Joint enterprise
- Shared repertoire

Early childhood music education in UK comprises largely freelance self-employed portfolio career professionals who, too often, have little opportunity to share their practice with other early childhood professionals (Pitt, 2018). In order to join a community of practice one has to be an insider (Rogoff, 2003), that is the only way that intra-activity, movement and shifts in thinking can take place[1]

Freelance arts practitioners may feel mutually engaged with others, they may have a sense of joint enterprise but if they are not included there is no chance of sharing repertoire and truly joining in the enterprise in a mutually engaged fashion, as described by Wenger (1998).

This project opened a space for the sharing and construction of new repertoire; it provided an 'insider' space for speech and language practices; early childhood music-arts practices; adult caregiver parenting practices and the expressive practices of young children be intermingled with the materials, artefacts and tools included in the multi-sensory environment and then selected by the human actors for use in the SALTMusic session.

Action Research Methodology

The most suitable design for this study was one that focused on actual rather than abstract processes (Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 2005, p.277), located in practical wisdom, or what Aristotle referred to as *Phronesis:* the capacity to make 'good' or right' judgements as part of a discerning attitude of practice (Elliott & Silverman, 2015, p.45). The approach taken by all the professional participants was based on *pedagogical sensitivity* (Huhtinen-Hildén, 2012), with a shared interest in adventuring in the environment using music and sound, being mindful and taking care of the learning process at all times (Huhtinen-Hildén & Pitt, 2018). Action research was originally intended by Kurt Lewin to change the life circumstances of disadvantaged groups (see Cohen, Manion & Morrison, p.297). These emancipatory, ethical dimensions were also appealing for SALTMusic, where a centrally important tenet to the approach was the "*understanding that young children are competent and capable of creative expressions that are valuable and integral to the group's overall aesthetic experiences that are considered necessary for all human thriving and belonging*"(Pitt & Arculus, 2018, p.17).

Colin Robson (2002, p.215) outlines three aspects of action research: improvement of practice, improvement of understanding practice and improvement of the situation where the practice occurs. To improve and understand practice, characterised our aims.

We adopted cyclical processes of planning, acting, observing, reflecting and

[1] I have written previously about the ways that a musician working within a multi-disciplinary team was able to join an integrated community of practice (Pitt, 2009)

then planning afresh. Figure 1 shows the cycle of reflection and action based on Schön (1983)
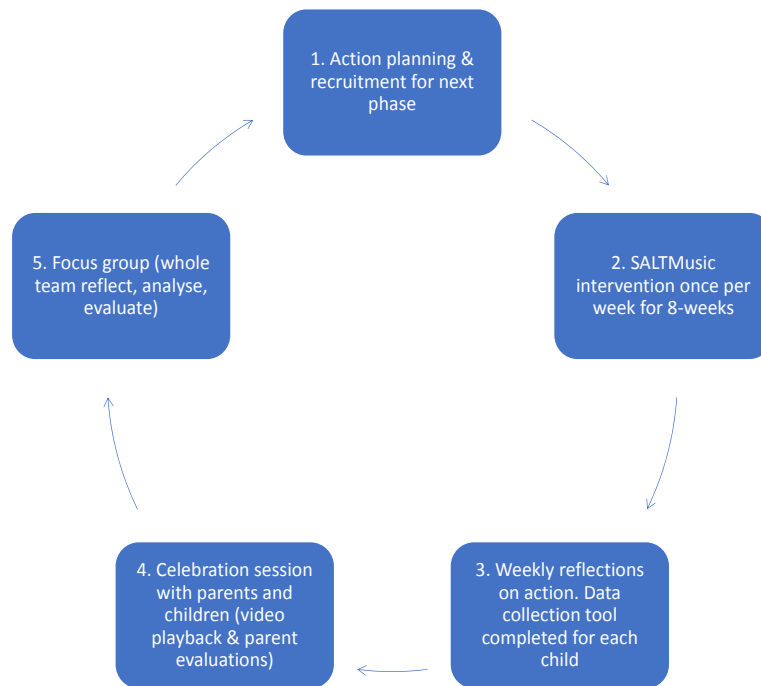

Figure 1 – Salt music cycle of action research (based on Pitt, Arculus & Fox, 2017)

There were five cycles of action and reflection. Parents and children were included in the cycles of action research, through evaluative discussions and the sharing of edited films collected through each cycle of 'intervention'. These gave all of us the chance to review and reflect on the inter-activity and inter-connectivity between the materials, the objects, and the humans (Lenz Taguchi, 2010).

Findings: Willingness to 'shift' to a new paradigm

> "*Not doing what we already do that we know works. We'll do that […] but actually we'll take it into the next paradigm.*"

> Music practitioner 2 (Focus group at start of the project Sept 2016)

This aspirational statement expresses the desire at the start of the project to move from what works, towards taking risks and stepping into shifts in practice, thinking and understanding as part of the working together; part of the joint enterprise. The two groups of practitioners did not know one another,

the following extract gives an insight into the ways that the team began to establish a working relationship.

Speaking about the first recruitment 'taster' session:

> *Musician 3: "I thought it went well, it was pretty much what we'd normally do in a session so perhaps you'd have more…(tailed off)"*

> *SLT[2] 1: "No…I thought it was really good. The only thing was establishing the speech and language roles within that very well-established group. It was so lovely, but it was almost so…what (laughter) would you like us to feed into that? Whether you want to adapt a few of the songs and things…"(heard in background "yup, yes")"*

> *SLT 1: We wondered about that planning time before the group. Whether we could have a set collaborative planning.*

> *Musician 1: That would be really useful*

> *Musician 2: it's not just useful it's essential. It's as important as running the group because otherwise we just run a load of great groups.*

> *Musician 1: so it's time before and after.*

> *Musician 2: yes, and it is about the shared practice. It's not about - this is music and it's really great. It's about how we move together, and how we influence each other's practice."*

> <div align="right">Second focus group (September, 2016)</div>

Etienne Wenger (1998, pp.72-85) talks about three dimensions at play when practice becomes the way that a community develops: mutual engagement, a joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. Each of these dimensions has different aspects that enable individual practitioners to coalesce as a community.

1. Mutual engagement –. Practice is not abstract, it "*resides in a community of people and the relations of mutual engagement by which they can do whatever they do.*" (Wenger, 1998, p.73). Mutual engagement depends on interactions and negotiations of the meanings inherent in the actions that the community do together. The comments in the extract above demonstrate the subtle ways that the SLTs were negotiating their role within the established session, gently suggesting that a shift was needed in established practice. Musician 2

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[2] SLT – Speech and Language Therapist

supports the negotiation, verbalising that movement will be required for influence and change to occur.

2. A joint enterprise – "*The enterprise is joint not in that everybody believes the same thing or agrees with everything, but in that its communally negotiated*" (Wenger, 1998, p.78). The professional experiences and expertise of the individuals were diverse, with different understandings about working with children and families. The group united around the common aim of the project to coordinate their various views together to form a unified approach. In the extract below the SLT uses the word 'weave' to speak of the ways that the joining together might happen:

    SLT1: we didn't know, because we know you're doing some really great things …]…Whether you want to weave in some…(trails off)

    Musician 2: No we want to weave you in definitely

    Musician 1: We want to learn from you."

The joint enterprise was constantly evolving based on negotiating "*what was important, what to do and what not to do…when artifacts are good enough and when they need improvement or refinement*" (Wenger, 1998, p.81). It was a dynamic process that became the rhythm (Ibid., p.82) of the project.

3. Shared repertoire - Through joint endeavour, the community develops and creates resources which are their shared repertoire. These resources can be "*routines, words, tools, ways of doing things, stories, gestures, symbols, genres³, actions or concepts that the community has produced or adopted in the course of its existence.*" (Ibid., p.83). The artefacts and tools that were created as part of the project are discussed in the section that follows, they stand as evidence of the community sharing joint enterprise and mutual engagement to produce shared repertoire artefacts that may have application and benefits far wider than the project.

Findings: New tools signify movement

One of the principle artefacts that was created as part of 'joint enterprise' (Wenger, 1998) was the tool to collect information about each child's experience in the session. The 'data collection tool' (see Appendix A) was created over the course of the first three cycles of action research, with revisions discussed at the focus group meeting at the end of each cycle. The revisions included the parents' perspectives plus reflections from observing the children as they watched themselves on the video playback. A new iteration of the tool was produced for the planning phase of the next cycle. The final version (see Appendix A) was agreed by all the professional

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³ Wenger uses this term to mean a class of artefacts or actions similar in style (p.288).

participants to represent every aspect of wellbeing and involvement (Laevers, 1994); social interaction and expression, it was subsequently used for two further cycles of action research (See Figure 2 that illustrates the process of arriving at the final artefact). It continues to be used for the ongoing SALTMusic groups' reflections beyond the lifetime of the project. This artefact, a new material created as part of the 'shared repertoire'(Wenger, 1998) of the community of SALTMusic practice, would never have existed had these particular professionals, parents, children, objects, sounds and interactions not come together at this time and place. It is a unique artefact created to stand for the deep reflection, discussion, intentions, intertwinings of material objects with other matter, human and sonic through inter- and intra-action as a result of 'joint enterprise'. The tool stands as a signifier of the 'movements' in thinking and understanding that were part of the process of action research and intra-active pedagogy-making.

I would like to suggest that we consider the status of materials and tools equally with the human participants in this process. By removing humans from the centre of the research process we can view the human element as part of an entangled whole in which the community of practice resides.
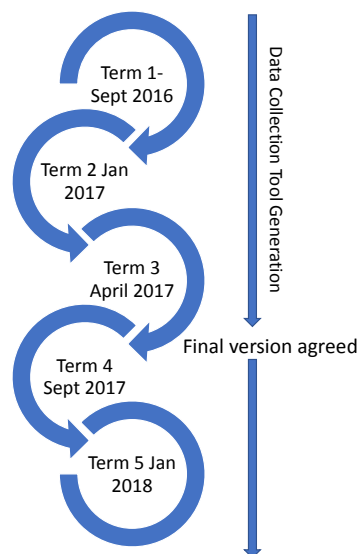

Figure 2 – Research in action: the process of generating the new artefact

Findings: Inter-action - the essential element

*"If we were to teach other practitioners one thing, I think the most essential is intensive interaction. Without meaningful **inter-action** with another person there is no desire from the child to want to communicate and I feel we have seen children pass through who were initially locked in their own bubble and unable to give anything of their personality from*

*a lack of ability to interact. For this reason, the **intensive interaction**[4] is the seed that we sow and that everything else grows from. Of course, the SLTs know this and have demonstrated this so ably both in their CPD session and in their practice and have been a great example for us to build into our own practice. I think as practitioners we probably do this instinctively, but it has been so valuable to gain a solid understanding of it[…]as it gives huge confidence to us to be able to communicate why we do certain things." Music Apprentice 1 interview*

A central understanding that has arisen in thinking differently about communication is the fundamental role that inter-action plays in the emergent pedagogy.
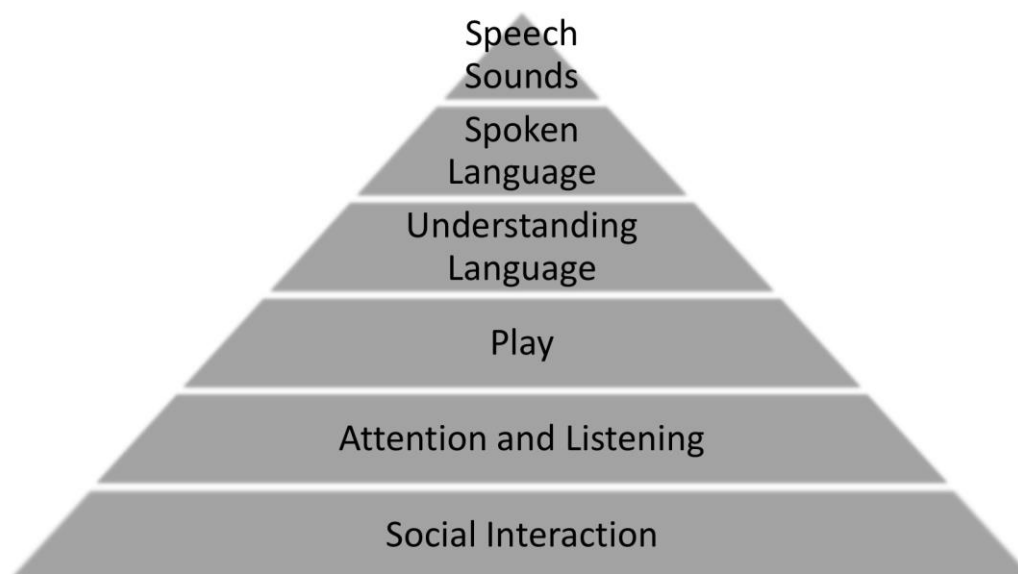
We found that putting inter-action as the cornerstone to practice, both parents and practitioners discovered the myriad ways that children used to communicate despite their speech and language difficulties. The Communication Pyramid (see Figure 3), a tool that the speech and language therapists use in their practice, illustrates the hierarchy of communication skills, with the preceding skill level being acquired before the next can be developed. Sharing this tool with parents/caregivers was found to be highly effective for them to understand why we recommended less talk and encouraged a focus on inter-action.

Children were found to inter-act in the following ways:
- Movement
- Gesture
- Laughter
- Vocalisation
- Eye contact
- Play with objects
- Giving and/ or being comfortable with attention
- Watching with interest
- Participation in group or one-to-one activities
- Singing own, or known songs
- Rhythmic activity
- Making choices when invited
- Leading and being led

Interaction, through the various domains listed above, was noticed when attunement and attention were given, when silence and space was made available. Donna Haraway (2015) speaks of Despret listening to a blackbird and understanding, in that attuned listening, what importance sounds like. By listening and waiting we became aware of what importance sounds like for young children with communication difficulties and their caregivers.

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[4] Intensive interaction is a technique from speech and language therapy practice (Nind, 1996, Nind & Hewett, 2013). It comprises: 1. C (see) the offer, 2. Copy the offer, 3. Celebrate the offer (Laurie, 2019).

The Communication Pyramid (adapted from East Coast Community Health, S&L Therapy)

Figure 3 – Sharing repertoire: The Communication Pyramid from speech and language therapy

Discussion

The dominance of words as a means to represent things in the world limits the accuracy in representing a project that was full of sonic splendour: moments of 'floating intentionality' (Cross, 1999, cited in 2010, p.68), laughter, sonic freeplay based on dramaturge John Wright's (2006) notion of 'finding the game'. The 'environment' that was created week-by-week by human choices of objects, instruments, and other materials cannot be adequately described in words nor can the impact of the fragrances of essential oils: rose geranium, clementine and basil that were sprayed in the air, all were integral elements of the entangled intra-active pedagogy (image one). The video recordings of the inter-activity are also artefacts that represent SALTMusic, as were the observations, the private jottings, the post-it note memory joggers, the inter-action and discussions each week that were not written down. The different elements were entangled together sometimes in ways that were hard to prise apart in order to suggest one had more impact than another in shaping the community and its processes of change. It is difficult to assert that it was the music specifically that caused the change in the children's communication because it is impossible to disentangle which bits of everything were music - without interaction, or the objects, or emotions, or the sense of wellbeing, or the multi-modal immersive space. It was, as Karen Barad suggests, an entanglement (2007) through which music affects and is affected by, everything else.

Image 1 Immersed in playful inter-action

Seen through this lens music as a temporal art form, entangled in the immersive multi-modal play space, shaped and ordered the interactions. It facilitated vocalisations through anticipation and release games that nurtured confidence. The rituals that music afforded in a liminal, immersive space conveyed a sense of belonging that does not require words. In fact, by removing words as the principle means of communication, music (manifest in movement, vocalisation, play with objects as well as singing / playing known material) was foregrounded and could be seen as a more useful means of interaction.

The networks that have connected together have permitted a construction of these children as capable, creative and able to contribute aesthetically to their community. We have arrived at an understanding that the pedagogy is intra-active: the interactions with the materials, the space, the music, the people mingling together for learning to occur. The pedagogical practices can be trans-acted in many contexts: with the elderly, with children with additional needs, and in professional development work.

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Appendix A

| *SALT Music Project:*
Date:
Child pseudonym:
Setting:
Music specialist:
SLT Therapist: | *Codes for frequency:*
A   Never
B   Occasionally
C   Sometimes
D   Frequently
E   Always | *Codes for social interaction: SI*
1   Own agenda Freeplay
2   Own agenda Group
3   Watching with interest
4   Comfortable w/attention
5   Group participation
6   Family interaction
7   Practitioner interaction
8   Peer-to-peer interaction
9   Child-initiated interaction | *Codes for expression: Exp*
1   Laughter
2   Vocalisations
3   Symbolic noises
4   Natural gestures
5   Single signs/words
6   Sign/word combinations
7   Singing
8   Rhythmic activity
9   Actions to song |

Codes for Laevers Scale - LW & LI
1   Extremely low
2   Low
3   Moderate
4   High
5   Extremely High

Reflective Journal Questions:
What question do I have at the end of the session? What will I try next time?

LW Start session:	LW High point
LI Start session:	LI High point:
SI:	
Exp:	
Commentary:	

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