Counselling with AAC users: learning from practice

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Short Abstract

This presentation is based on the conference theme of "innovate" in the context of counselling.

Delegates will gain insight into

- the practice experience of one social worker's learning from counselling with AAC users,
- basic Narrative Therapy concepts,
- How the presenter has used Narrative Therapy concepts with AAC users and non-typical communicators.

Treasure Chests and Side Quests (TTSQ) is a provider of Social Work and counselling services in Albury NSW. TTSQ is dedicated to upholding the rights of people who do not speak, or who are unable to depend on speech.

Currently, the people who access this service include

- mostly symbol-based AAC learners,
- a minority of text based communicators, and
- many who use verbal sounds, echolalia, gestalts, gestures and body movement to communicate.
- The majority have cognitive/ intellectual disability, and most are Autistic, though a wide variety of disabilities are represented.

This presentation will discuss learning from practice, from concept to reality, including:

- centreing (and treasuring) the knowledge and authentic identities of people who access services,
- concept versus reality: the difference between ideas and how these have worked in practice,

- how counselling with AAC users and non- typical communicators differs from counselling with people for whom speech is easy.

It will also discuss counselling modalities, including:

- a discussion about narrative therapy, and it's relevance to practice,
- a discussion about why some modalities may be unhelpful to AAC users.

Finally, this presentation will discuss a de-identified story from practice.

Long Abstract

This paper is based on the conference theme of "innovate" in the context of counselling with people who do not speak, and those whose communication is not typical. It is draws on practice experience, and is story based, rather than academic.

It will explore learning from practice; including the presenter's reflections about

- the importance of seeking to understand the authentic identity of AAC users (as opposed to identities conveyed by others),
- placing the lived experience of AAC users at the heart of practice, and
- creating innovative solutions to practice, rather than adapting existing frameworks to fit. This will discuss the presenter's past experience as a full time AAC user, and how lived experience influenced theoretical understanding of counselling modalities.

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Currently, the people who access this service include:

1. Predominantly people are learning or using symbol based Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). Most of the symbol based AAC users are learning their system, and are not proficient AAC users. AAC proficiency varies, ranging between people who are sometimes able to find (a small number) of single words to communicate in context, to those reliably using three word sequences. These people depend on a range of communication methods, including gestures, pointing, some Key

Word Sign, echolalia, and leading. Currently, there are no symbol based AAC users who are proficient users accessing the service. More than half of these AAC users did not have access to AAC at the time of referral.
2. Two people who use text based communication,
3. One person who communicates largely in verbal gestalts and echolalia,
4. One person who speaks clearly, but whose communication may be misunderstood in different settings,
5. One person who uses photos, gestures, sounds and actions to communicate,
6. Families, and support teams of non-speaking, or non-typical communicators.

The majority of people accessing the service have cognitive/intellectual disability, and most are Autistic, although a wide variety of disabilities are represented. In the last two years, service users have ranged in age from 10 to 80. Services are provided face to face.

This presentation will discuss learning from practice, from concept to reality, including:

- centreing (and treasuring) the knowledge and authentic identities of people who access services,
- concept versus reality: the difference between ideas and how these have worked in practice,
- how counselling with AAC users and non- typical communicators differs from counselling with people for whom speech is easy.

It will also discuss counselling modalities, including:

- a discussion about narrative therapy, and it's relevance to practice,
- a discussion about why some modalities may be unhelpful to AAC users.

Finally, this presentation will discuss a de-identified story from practice.

Privacy of people who access services is of upmost importance. De-identified stories will only ever be shared with enthusiastic consent from the person who it is about.