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Making the sensory make sense

Paul Pagliano outlines the principles underlying effective use of the multisensory environment

The physical space used to promote multisensory activity has attracted many names over the years. Some refer to snoezelen®, multi-sensory rooms, sensory studios®, sensory theatre and sensory trolleys. I prefer, though, to use the term multisensory environment (MSE) (Pagliano, 1999; 2001). Numerous reasons can be identified to help explain why the concept has spawned such diversity. These include historical and commercial factors, a lack of agreement as to what the term means, the need to design the space to suit particular clients and uses, technological innovations, new research regarding the senses and how the brain works, a lack of theory and a paucity of supporting research regarding the actual environment.

Shortly after the original Dutch “snoezelen” concept was publicised by Hulsegge and Verheul (1986/7), the term was registered by a commercial

company. This action immediately transformed the word snoezelen® into a commercial term, so many shied away from using it. Meanwhile other commercial enterprises also tried to get in on the act by registering their own names. Consequently, over the years, a wide array of descriptors emerged.

These environments began to be used with different groups, from young children with disabilities through to people in aged care with dementia, by professionals from social care, nursing, the therapies and education. This enormous fluidity of understanding as to what constitutes the space has made it almost impossible for high quality quantitative research to be conducted to support and inform its use. As a consequence, the unbridled concept has not only captured the imagination of those individuals who strive to help improve the quality of life of people with debilitating sensory conditions,

Multisensory stimulation is precognitive in nature...making it more suitable for people with profound disorders of communication

it has also provided opportunities for some people to use the space in inappropriate ways.

An attempt towards uniformity and conformity

In 2009, I attended the First Annual Multi Sensory Idea FORUM in Alabama, USA. Organised by US charity the Christopher Douglas Hidden Angel Foundation, the meeting’s goal was to provide leadership in the MSE area by working towards developing a more universal definition and to prepare guidelines for its use. The proposed draft definition was:

“The MSE is a dynamic pool or Intellectual Property (IP) developed over 35 years. The multi sensory environment IP relates to a medium for communication that centres around a natural process of multi sensory stimulation that is accessible, demand-free, choice-driven, empowering, meaningful, and pleasurable, based on the needs and interests of the person [client]. The MSE is delivered with respect, equality, and human dignity. This MSE multidimensional IP platform can be



used in different applications including recreation and leisure, education and treatment (Fornes, Messbauer, Pagliano, & Verheul, 2009).

This word, “platform”, has two meanings. It can be a stage on which action takes place or it can be a declaration of principles. Both meanings fit this definition. The MSE is both a space where action takes place and the action takes place according to a set of four principles. These will be discussed in the following section.

What makes an MSE?

The first principle emphasises the idea of the MSE being a medium for communication. Most communication media, for example speech, language, print and television, require high cognitive functioning for transmission and reception of messages. On the other hand, multisensory stimulation is precognitive in nature; it is much more concrete and immediate than most forms of communication, making it more suitable for people with profound disorders of communication. The type of communication possible through this multisensory medium tends to be relatively simple, for example messages pertaining to it being a safe, comfortable, interesting or fun place to be.

McLuhan (1964) explained his claim, “the medium is the message”, by writing: “the form of a medium imbeds itself in the message, creating a symbiotic relationship by which the medium influences how the message is perceived creating subtle change over time”. With the MSE, the space where the multisensory stimulation takes place thereby becomes as significant as the stimulation itself. This is because, over time, the space and the stimulation work together to create the message. Subsequent principles provide guidelines as to how to carefully nurture and maintain this relationship.

The second principle stresses the importance of the stimulation being

The human body naturally functions best at a multisensory level

multisensory. Modern research clearly demonstrates that the human body naturally functions best at a multisensory level. As Calvert, Spence and Stein (2004) so compellingly state, “There can be no doubt that our senses are designed to function in concert and that our brains are organized to use the information they derive from their various sensory channels cooperatively in order to enhance the probability that objects and events will be detected rapidly, identified correctly, and responded to appropriately.” Keeping the stimulation multisensory therefore enhances the chance of success when catering for people with debilitating sensory conditions.

The third principle focuses on the type of stimulation, that it is “accessible, demand-free, choice-driven, empowering, meaningful, and pleasurable, based on the needs and interests of the person [client]”. This is a tremendously complicated principle, which requires MSE practitioners to have a wealth of in-depth knowledge, understanding and know-how about both the client and their condition, which would only come from ongoing staff education and development. It further requires the practitioner to use a style of interaction with the client that uses continuous motivation and reward, achieved through careful and critical observation of how the client participates. Over time, the critical practitioner gradually builds up an expertise regarding what stimulation promotes higher quality client engagement.

The fourth principle accentuates the way the MSE practitioner delivers the multisensory stimulation to the client, that is, with respect, equality, and human dignity. Many people with debilitating

sensory conditions are vulnerable and it is important to ensure that the MSE is controlled in ethical ways.

Applications

The final part of the definition introduces the idea that the MSE can be used for a range of applications including leisure and recreation, therapy and education. Providing the four principles are followed, the MSE practitioner can modify the MSE to achieve different purposes. This means that with each application the goal will change, as will the relationship between the client and the MSE practitioner.

With leisure and recreation the goal is freedom, pleasure and reward. The client is in charge with the MSE practitioner there as facilitator.

With therapy the goal changes to provide a treatment to promote wellbeing and healing. Here the MSE practitioner takes a more active and directional role to assist the client. The way various therapies might be applied will naturally be informed by that discipline, for example the occupational therapist would concentrate on promoting functionality, the physiotherapy would concentrate on physical wellbeing and the speech therapist would focus on communication.

With education the goal changes to learning and development. Here the MSE practitioner leads the client towards achieving specific learning outcomes, particularly in the direction of engagement and learning through the senses. **SEN**

Further information

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