

Landscape of Touch

COMPANION GUIDE

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Introduction

What is tactile communication?

People communicate to understand each other, to establish relationships, to get information, to work and live together and just to enjoy interacting with each other. People who are deafblind have a combined vision and hearing loss that, even if both are mild, impacts communication, access to information and possibly well-being. People who were deafblind at birth or became deafblind in their very first years of life are considered congenitally deafblind. They potentially have fragmented experiences as they seek to share a world with people who experience that world mostly through visual images and sounds.

It is often not possible to communicate effectively with a person who is deafblind using only typical auditory and visually modalities. Communication often needs to be supported by the tactile mode in order for it to be meaningful and truly reciprocal for a person with deafblindness. Some examples of tactile interaction and communication forms are: tactile body language that relies on accessing what we normally think of as non-verbal communication through the tactile mode, tactile gestures; reading speech through touch; tactile sign language; three-dimensional reference objects; tactile symbols; Braille.

Competent tactile communication partners

Hearing and sighted persons are often not very aware of their tactile sense. To become competent communication partners with people who are deafblind, they need to become aware what it means to rely on the sense of touch -as people who are deafblind must do. They need to begin to experience the complexity and richness of the tactile world, and to develop skills for themselves in using tactile communication.

Tactile Communication Group

In 2001, persons from Europe and the United States established the Tactile Communication Group under the auspices of Deafblind International (DbI). This group focused on developing insights and practical suggestions regarding tactile communication with people who are congenitally deafblind.

The initial members, Bernadette Van Den Tillaart, Barbara Miles, Gunnar Vege and Barbara Bettenmann were able to meet through initial funding from Viataal and Zentrum Tanne and continued funding from Perkins International and Andebu Døvblindesenter. When Barbara Bettenmann's daily work in Switzerland prevented her from further participation, Paul Hart joined the group and Sense Scotland became a funding organization as well. We are very grateful for the contributions of these organizations and the continued support of Deafblind International.

Over the years, the discussions and the focus of video examples shared by the members of the group moved from just thinking about techniques and curricular or developmental steps to fundamental thoughts about what it might mean to be congenitally deafblind and live in a rich tactile world. The responses of participants in our presentations in DbI conferences supported our thinking and direction. To share these

ideas with a wider community, we started working on a movie.

Landscape of Touch

'Landscape of Touch' follows the experience of people – both deafblind and seeing/hearing, as they explore, interact and communicate with each other in the tactile world. When we write about people who are deafblind, we are referring to both children and adults.

A person with sight and hearing needs a radical shift in perspective in order to experience and understand the world from a tactile perspective, which is the way that people who are deafblind experience their world. When tactile experiences become meaningful for both partners in an interaction, this becomes the foundation for exploration of new environments, development of meaningful communication, and the building of friendships.

This DVD offers specific images that show this shift in perspective that is required to enter the rich unique world of tactile experience that is inhabited by people who are deafblind.

The title of the DVD, *'Landscape of Touch'*, refers to a shift from distant landscapes, often associated with living in a visual world, to landscapes that are literally within touching distance - experienced through the sense of touch.

In order not to be distracted from a focus on hands, feet and bodies as they interact through touch with the world around them, we decided to leave out spoken words or terminology. For those who would like to learn more, we will post additional and related materials on the Dbl webpage.

Universal access

Not using spoken words also makes it possible for people from different cultures or languages to have access to this movie.

When the movie was finished in 2010, we started developing a companion guide and making all the final technical arrangements for publication with great support of Sense Scotland and Perkins International. Access for people who are visually impaired and deafblind was made possible by providing an audio description on the DVD, and by providing the movie, the text of the audio description and a signed description on the Dbl webpage.

The Companion Guide

Moving into unknown territory, such as in tactile landscapes, might create unease and misinterpretations. To support viewers of the movie to make a comfortable and open shift towards this tactile experience, we have developed suggestions for viewing the movie. We strongly suggest that leaders of groups or individual viewers read this section on suggestions as a preparation for their viewing.

It is hoped that the DVD will lead to enhanced shared understanding between seeing/hearing people and people who are deafblind, and to increased joyfulness in our mutual exploration of the tactile world in which we all live.

Suggestions for the use of 'Landscape of Touch'

These suggestions can be used by teams, families, presenters, instructors, or by people who view this movie by themselves. Anyone can be a leader of a group if they take the time to read this companion guide and prepare for the gathering.

Introduction

After welcoming the group, the leader introduces the topic: Landscape of Touch. The text in the introduction might be helpful for this purpose.

Guided Imagery (*In preparation for viewing*)

The leader explains to the group that there will be some moments of preparation before viewing the movie. The leader darkens the room. The leader starts the DVD without showing visual images. The soundtrack from the DVD plays over the speakers, as the leader reads the following guided imagery aloud, reading slowly and calmly, letting the words settle in . . .

Relax in your seat for a few minutes feeling your breath go in and out, feeling your body settle into the chair beneath you. Close your eyes, (unless you are uncomfortable doing so). We're going to go on a short journey into our imaginations. Remember for a moment a fabulous landscape that you have seen sometime in the last year – this could be looking out to sea, or gazing at a mountain, it could be thinking about your home town or country, perhaps a forest, or even a city skyline..... (pause) whatever you are remembering, just let it come into your mind – remember the colours that you can see – are there any greens, blues, reds, yellows. What time of year are you imagining and is this affecting the colours? How do the colours mix with each other – what are the colours bringing to mind?

In order to get the full sense of the colours, look around your imagined landscape– try to capture the whole scene – to the left...to the right...look as far into the distance as you can see...

Now remember for a moment any sounds that might be present in your landscape – any sounds of running water – perhaps a crashing wave, a trickling stream. Maybe it's the sounds of leaves gently rustling in the wind, maybe there are the sounds of children playing, or dogs barking, or the sound of traffic whizzing around below you... whatever sounds you can hear, just bring them all to mind and again drink in everything from your landscape, lose yourself for a moment in your imagined landscape...

Now imagine somebody you really love is standing beside you – you are pointing out your favourite elements within this landscape – you can feel their excitement too as they learn all about your passion for that tree, that wave, that small crevice in the side of cliff-face, the way the eagle is swooping down toward the water, or the way the smoke billows gently across the skyline of grey buildings...show them more in your landscape, spend a few moments just now picking out your favourite scenes...

Just sit for a few moments with the feelings evoked by this remembered landscape, letting those feelings settle comfortably into your mind and body. When you feel comfortable, slowly open your eyes. (Allow time here for participants to re-adjust to the visual world.)

Is the world so fabulously rich and exciting for people who are deafblind? Or can we too easily slip into the

trap of imagining that it's a real shame for people who are deafblind, particularly those born deafblind? We may recognize in ourselves attitudes like: it's a real pity to be deafblind; it must be really lonely, quiet and dark in a world with limited distance senses; how could they ever share our world?

So that's one possibility, that's one extreme view – the world is not so colourful and full of interest for a deafblind person.

But here's an alternative view and it is inspired by an idea from Barbara Miles. Speaking once at a conference, she picked up a glass from the table, held it for a moment and then said, *"Within this glass there could exist an entire landscape for a deafblind child"*.

A man named Martin Prechtel once said this:

*"The highest form of praise we can give
is to acknowledge a person's interest and to
explore the world together."*

For a communication partner and a person who is deafblind, this means engaging in deep and respectful exploration of the tactile world.

What would it feel like to:

- *Experience the rain on your face as the water droplets trickle gently down on your eyelids, past the creases next to your nose, onto your lips and chin?*
- *Explore the ocean, perhaps by sitting in it (even with your clothes on!) and to let the wet sand caress your hands?*
- *Walk through a forest and really touch the plants and trees?*
- *Explore your own face, your hands or your feet or even explore the face of another person?*
- *Eat with someone and to feel their chin as the food is chewed, to explore their throat as the food is swallowed?*
- *Bake a cake or knead some dough and to feel all the textures, smell all the smells with heightened awareness?*
- *Feel the tingle on the palm of your hand just after someone else has clapped your hand?*
- *Sit very close to someone so that you can feel their*

*breathing, touch their head with your head,
entwine your arms?*

Transition

As we imagine these things, and as we remember our own love of a particular visual landscape, let us go on a bit of a journey into landscapes of touch, into a way of experiencing the world that is natural for people with deafblindness. As we view this movie, let us try to become more familiar with their ways of experiencing their worlds –

Video

Play the video with sound over the speakers.

Individual reflections

When the video is complete, you may want to allow some moments of silence, and then invite people to write down a few impressions or reactions, or recall them for themselves, quietly.

Sharing reflections and discussion of related topics

After the quiet reflection, the group may want to share their responses. Emphasize that all responses are welcome, and that each individual will have his or her own thoughts and feelings.

Sharing is for the purpose of raising awareness – awareness of both the experience of people with deafblindness and the experience of their communication partners.

On the next pages there are some thoughts or questions. You may want to use these to guide your group in a discussion or to guide your own reflections if you watched this alone. These questions do not necessarily have a specific order; they can be used when they match the responses of the viewers or to build upon these responses:

- *What were your initial reactions?*
- *Is the world of touch foreign to you?*
- *What things made you more aware? More curious?*
- *Did you experience some of the images of touch and movement in a different way than you would have before you saw the movie?*
- *Were there things that made you feel uncomfortable?*
- *What is your home and cultural experience of touch?*
- *How might this have influenced your reactions?*
- *Do you have clear personal boundaries regarding touch?*
- *Are you able to separate non-sexual/educational touch from sexual touch? (It is never appropriate, in a professional context, to make physical contact with anyone with*

sexual intent.)

- *What could you do as an individual or a group to feel (more) comfortable in this mode when interacting with people who are deafblind?*
- *Were there images that evoked a feeling of enjoyment or happiness when you were looking at them?*
- *What was it that you enjoyed so much?*
- *Would you have new ideas about how to re-create that same feeling of enjoyment when interacting with people who are deafblind that you know?*
- *Which images in this world of touch did you experience as very different?*
- *Which actions were perhaps not so different but just looked different in the tactile mode?*
- *Could the tactile sense have an important role for people who are deafblind but who also have who have residual hearing and / or vision?*
- *How can you, using the tactual sense, build on what you already know about interacting with people who are deafblind?*
- *How can you affirm initiatives of people who are deafblind so that they know you have perceived and acknowledged them?*
- *How can you translate your initiatives, interests and ideas into the tactile mode when you are with people who are deafblind?*

Simulation Activities

To support hearing and/or seeing people to experience the world from a tactile perspective, the group may do some simulation activities. Some of these activities might mesh smoothly with the responses and be blended in the discussion. They might also be used after the discussion. Here are two suggestions for simple simulation activities:

Activity 1

Ask participants if they are willing to participate in a short simulation. If they are, then invite them to stand, find a partner (preferably someone they do not know so well), and to stand next to their partner. Then ask that everyone close their eyes and remain silent.

Say,
“Find your partner’s hands, and get to know them for a few moments.”

Allow the exploration to continue for about 30 seconds.

Then say,
“You may open your eyes now, and you may talk with your partner.”

After a couple of minutes of talking, ask participants to sit down, and invite them to share any experiences they had during that time, or any increased awareness of the tactile way of experiencing the world. Are there any increased understandings of the possible experiences of people who are deafblind?

Activity 2

Give blindfolds (and ear defenders) to half the participants and ask them to put them on. Ask that no one speak during this simulation time. Ask the blindfolded persons to either sit or stand, as they are comfortable, and to imagine themselves as deafblind. Ask those without blindfolds to each approach one of the “*deafblind*” people, and to make a respectful initial contact, taking as much time as needed to allow the “*deafblind*” person to become aware of their partner’s presence, to initiate contact if they wish, or to accept respectful, non-invasive tactile contact. Once a relatively comfortable contact is made, the sighted partner may seek to invite the “*deafblind*” person to explore a nearby object or part of the environment along with him or her. Ask the sighted partner to be careful to not ever control the hands of the “*deafblind*” person, but only to invite them to follow, or to respectfully follow the hands of the “*deafblind*” person if they seem to want contact. The partner’s goal during this phase of the simulation is to let the “*deafblind*” person know that the tactile attention is shared, that *“I see what you see”* as far as possible.

After about 5 minutes, ask participants to remove blindfolds, and speak with their partners about the experience. Then have a focused group sharing, where people are encouraged to raise awareness of what specific gestures or techniques were comfortable, which were not comfortable, and what they have learned that might change their interactions with people who are deafblind.

Time permitting, reverse roles, so that all participants have the chance to experience “*being deafblind*” for a few minutes and feeling what it is like to be approached in the tactile mode, and what it is like to share joint attention in a tactile mode.

A move into practice

Here are some suggestions for implementing approaches as seen in ‘Landscape of Touch’ in your contact with people who are deafblind.

Trying out some examples you have seen on the video could be helpful for you and give you new ideas and increased confidence in your interactions. You might consider which examples you want to try out. It will depend on the individuality and tactile characteristics of each particular deafblind person. Not every example fits every person who is deafblind.

Before you approach for initial contact, consider how you could get attention and contact the person who is deafblind without unexpectedly or suddenly touching him or her.

Starting with the use of hand-under-hand or hand-beside-hand (the partner's hand under the hand of the person who is deafblind, which is always free, or gently beside their hand), the communication partner could ask permission from the person who is deafblind to follow their hands and movements.

By following, the communication partner might observe what the person who is deafblind is interested in, explores and experiences.

If the partner initially follows and then affirms (acknowledges) the initiatives, opportunities are opened up for reciprocal tactile interactions, joint attention, mutual exploration of the world, affective involvement and natural conversations.

Allowing people who are deafblind to feel how other people perform everyday and other activities, and informing and showing them what happens in their environment, will give them access to the world and offer them increased opportunities for developing more concepts and becoming more independent. For this to occur naturally, the person who is deafblind may first need to become comfortable following the hands of a communication partner as he or she engages with the world. The comfort grows from the partner's initial respectful following of the hands of the person who is deafblind, and the determination to let the person who is deafblind retain control of his/her hands under all circumstances.

By addressing the tactile sense in combination with the other remaining senses, communication partners can develop effective tactile communication forms for each person who is deafblind.

Sharing memories about previously shared tactile experiences could support building stories and living within a past, present and future.

A great tool to use might be video-taping the implementation of these suggestions and approaches and then analyzing these fragments to find best practice examples and positive effects on well being and development. They also might help to attune the use of touch with each particular deafblind person.

To implement these tactile strategies successfully, other resources could provide additional support.

Inspirational Quotes

After the group has had some time to share their responses, you may want to read some words aloud, either as a part of the shared reflections and discussions or as a closing.

There are some suggestions here, but you may have your own words to use instead. You may want to use all three of these quotations if you wish because they complement each other well.

Quotation 1

These words are from Jacques Lusseyran, a man who lost his sight as a young child, and who describes his experience of learning to “see” with his hands:

“Unlike eyes, [my hands] were in earnest, and from whatever direction they approached an object they covered it, tested its resistance, leaned against the mass of it and recorded every irregularity of its surface...

Movement of the fingers was terribly important, and had to be uninterrupted because objects do not stand at a given point, fixed there, confined in one form. They are alive, even the stones. What is more they vibrate and tremble...

Yet there was something still more important than movement, and that was pressure. If I put my hand on the table without pressing it, I knew the table was there, but knew nothing about it. To find out, my fingers had to bear down, and the amazing thing is that the pressure was answered by the table at once. Being blind I thought I should have to go out to meet things, but I found that they came to meet me instead. I have never had to go more than halfway, and the universe became the accomplice of all my wishes...

Touching the tomatoes in the garden, and really touching them, touching the walls of the house, the materials of the curtains or a clod of earth is surely seeing them as fully as eyes can see. But it is more than seeing them, it is tuning in on them and allowing the current they hold to connect with one’s own, like electricity. To put it differently, this means an end of living in front of things and a beginning of living with them. Never mind if the word sounds shocking, for this is love...”

(Lusseyran, J. (1985). And There Was Light. The Autobiography of a Blind Hero in the French Resistance. Floris Books. Pages 15-16)

We saw examples of this kind of exploration in the movie and maybe now you can reflect on ways that you can interact with the world around you through touch. What connection can you make with objects that maybe you couldn’t simply through vision and hearing?

Quotation 2

Thich Nhat Hanh recounts asking a group of children to think about the origins of a tangerine before eating it.

“They saw not only their tangerine, but also...the tangerine tree... They began to visualise the blossoms in the sunshine and in the rain. They then saw petals falling down and tiny green fruit appear. The sunshine and the rain continued, and the tiny tangerine grew...each child was invited to peel the tangerine slowly, noticing the mist and the fragrance of the tangerine and then bring it up to his or her mouth and have a mindful bite, in full awareness of the texture and taste of the fruit and the juice coming out...Each time you look at a tangerine, you can see deeply into it. You can see everything in the universe in one tangerine. When you peel it and smell it, it’s wonderful. You can take your time eating a tangerine and be very happy.”

(Thich Nhat Hanh. (1995). Peace is every step: the path of mindfulness in everyday life. London: Rider. Page 21)

This means slowing the world down and it means a full and complete immersion in the experience – it means letting the world come to you as much as you come to it. You can take this same approach when exploring the world alongside people who are deafblind. Think of oranges, or trees, or bread, or tables, or any object at all not simply from a seeing-hearing perspective, but from a tactile and bodily perspective.

Quotation 3

In his Letter on the Blind written in 1749, Diderot wrote these wonderful words:

“And I found that of all the senses the eye as the most superficial, the ear the most haughty, smell the most voluptuous, taste the most superstitious and inconstant, touch the most profound and philosophical”.

Resources

Please visit the Deafblind International website:

www.deafblindinternational.org

and go to the Tactile Communication Group page to find further information and links to resources about the use of touch and tactile communication.

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