

Adventures in Positive Risk-Taking: Intensive Interaction and Creativity

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Introduction

In some ways though I feel like a bit of a cheat being here because, although earlier in career I was key to inception, development and study of Intensive Interaction, these days my engagement with learning difficulties is more likely to be with someone struggling to complete their PhD on time! I stopped doing training on Intensive Interaction, something I did with Oxford in particular for quite some time, six years ago when I came to a (somewhat sad) conclusion that I just wasn't having enough hands-on interactive contact with people with profound intellectual impairment to be credible – or at least to feel credible to myself. This did not, however, mean an end to my involvement with the approach as I continue to advise students and others, particularly in thorny matters of methodology regarding how to effectively study Intensive Interaction.

Moreover, I continue to think about Intensive Interaction when I am working on other projects, to make connections, to re-visit some of the key concepts in Intensive Interaction. I did this recently when working with troubled girls in a new provision developing a curriculum just for them – so much of that work was about relationship, attachments, being responsive, learning to tune in and really listen. I went from thinking '*I'm a specialist in severe and profound learning disabilities and autism, what do I know about girls who've been excluded from mainstream school on grounds of behaviour*', to thinking '*this is familiar territory, this is about re-thinking how we do things, this is about starting from where the girls are at not where we wish they were*'. That may sound familiar to some of you who are more immersed in Intensive Interaction.

The last time I was here, not in Oxford, but speaking at an Intensive Interaction annual conference, I was doing the same kind of thing I'm doing now. Talking about a current project and relating it to Intensive Interaction in hope of making helpful connections. At that time I was involved in working with academics, practitioners and people with learning disabilities on the concept of access – what it means to access education, healthcare, citizenship, and yes – to quote a certain book – access to communication. The ideas I brought here were about moving beyond access to

communication to connect this to broader access agendas, particularly access to social and emotional well-being.

This time I am taking a concept that emerged from that work on access, the concept of positive risk-taking, and doing some thinking out loud about it. My hope is that the concept will have some resonance for you and some usefulness. At the very beginning of our work on Intensive Interaction we were enabled greatly by Gary Ephraim, who with 'augmented mothering' gave us some concepts to think with. The conceptual tools of Intensive Interaction include contingent responding, mutual pleasure, imputing intentionality, interactive match and tasklessness. It is my view that concepts are helpful, practical tools. They facilitate our identification and handling of problems – they allow us to move forward with how we see what is before us. So, please indulge in some conceptual thinking with me about positive risk-taking.

Positive Risk-Taking

I begin with some insights from Gary Butler, a young man with learning disabilities who works at St Georges Medical School training doctors on working with patients with learning disabilities. Gary took part in our discussions about access and talked about when he wanted to move in with his girlfriend, also with learning disabilities who could sometimes be quite challenging. Gary recalled concerns about Sharon's volatile temper and what would happen if she hit him. He comments: 'I said: "OK, let's turn this the other way round. What if none of the problems happen?"' (Butler, 2010: 16). This is one of the best articulations of positive risk-taking that I can give you. It is about turning the question around from 'what if something goes wrong - to what if it goes right – what then!'

Duncan Smith, a student at Southampton who is researching positive risk-taking sums it up rather wonderfully in visual form. His cartoon encapsulates how we need to concern ourselves with potential harm and with safeguarding people who may be vulnerable, but that we must not neglect the potential for opening up new opportunities when we do take a chance and look at what may be over the horizon.

To return to Gary Butler again, in his chapter in the book we edited from our collaborative work on access (Butler, 2010: 158) he stresses why think is important for him: 'I took a risk taking the job at St George's because I knew my benefits would go all over the place [...] I took the risk because I thought I can't live off benefits all my life. I don't want to grow old and just sit there in an armchair and be bored out of my life. I hope you are already making connections with Intensive Interaction work – what for the people you support the equivalent may be to a life on the sofa or to getting a meaningful job. I will return to this again later.

First, I will clarify some more the essence of positive risk-taking. This a concept we develop in our final chapter in our book on access (Seale & Nind, 2010), but the idea is not original to Jane Seale and myself. It was discussed earlier this century by Alaszewski and Alaszewski (2002) in the context of the role risk has played in shaping policies and services for people with learning difficulties.

The dominant discourse of course is that this is a group who are surrounded by danger - 'at-risk' – at risk of failure to thrive, at risk of failure to access adequate healthcare (Mitchell, 2010), at risk of experiencing significant inequalities in ordinary society. The recent Panorama expose showed how people continue to be at risk of systematic abuse and dehumanisation.

The 'at risk' discourse therefore can be helpful for highlighting where there is a need for action but it can also entrench people in discourses of need rather than entitlement. Positive risk-taking discourses are more in keeping with Swadener and Lubeck's (1995: 11) alternative of vision of children and families being "at-promise" – requiring enabling as well as protecting.

A consequence of risk and protection discourses is that services can adopt quite risk averse policies and practices in response not just to identified risk, but to risks that are more perceived than real. You may have read about some of the battles we had in the early days of Intensive Interaction in the face of 'no touch policies' and so on. You may still find yourselves working in cultures that are deeply risk-averse. In our informal interactions today I'd love to hear how you would characterise the approach to risk taken by your organisations.

Alaszewski and Alaszewski (2002) certainly found risk policies were often based on 'a restricted approach to risk' which emphasised hazard assessment and health and safety issues. Our seminar participants were often at the hard end of these. In relating their experiences three young people told us:

We have to live with rules to protect us...rules about who can go out alone, who can sleep upstairs, not running up the stairs or standing on chairs and so on. Some of this is also about not doing things that other residents might copy. But some of it is because of staff worried about us having epileptic seizures. They questioned whether we could sign up to learn karate. We also have to have alarms in our rooms and wear chains with medical information on. These are the things we want to put an end to when we live by our own rules in our own homes. We want to be able to lock our own doors and be private.
(Drew et al, 2007, p.x)

Being cocooned away from risk is not always in the interests of the people concerned. This approach, I would argue, often more about protecting staff – from accusations, misinterpretations, fear of being sued, than it is about protecting people with learning disabilities.

There has though been a policy shift reflecting an alternative stance most marked by the Mental Capacity Act which adopted a set of four principles requiring us to think more positively about people's abilities or capacities:

1. A person must be assumed to have capacity unless it is established that he lacks capacity.
2. A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision unless all practicable steps to help him to do so have been taken without success.
3. A person is not to be treated as unable to make a decision merely because he makes an unwise decision.

4. An act done, or decision made, under this Act for or on behalf of a person who lacks capacity must be done, or made, in his best interests.

The implication here is one of presuming competence rather than incompetence, but also quite significantly there is contained in here the idea that it is okay for people to sometimes get it wrong. Perske (1972), back in the 1970s argued that experiencing 'the risk-taking of ordinary life' is necessary for normal human growth and development. The bulk of the psychological literature recognises the value of people taking risks for developing – for finding out who they are, what they can do, and so on. There is a more positive than negative stance on risk.

Increasingly, we are moving towards a discourse of shared risk-taking – where staff and the people they support weigh up risks together. *Valuing People Now* (DoH, 2007) acknowledge that the balance between protecting vulnerable people and helping people to have a good life can be got wrong and that 'positive risk taking should be a part of everyone's life' (DoH, 2007: 77).

At a local level this is being interpreted in ways that make a difference. In Southampton there has been a notable shift:

By taking account of the benefits in terms of independence, well-being and choice, it should be possible for a person to have a support plan which enables them to manage risks and to live their lives in ways which best suit them. People new to the concept of self-directed support often have concerns about the risks involved. In fact, when individuals are given the freedom to design their own care packages, it has been shown that they make sensible and mature choices that improve their quality of life and keep them safe. Risk taking should no longer be regarded in isolation with harm, but as a means for service users to become more self-reliant and to self develop. (Southampton City Council 2008)

An in Cumbria they have addressed the issue at the level of organisational culture:

The Positive Risk Taking Group (Cumbria) was a working group tasked with the job of changing policy, procedure, practice, guidance and attitude away from a culture of avoiding risks at all costs (a risk averse culture) towards positive risk taking (a risk management culture). (Cumbria County Council 2006)

It is rarely clear, however, how such policy statements can be turned into action. Jane Seale, Ben Simons, Duncan Smith and I are exploring this and seeking detailed, rich descriptions of access practices that are underpinned by these new conceptualisations in order to describe and identify best practices that exemplify positive risk taking in action. Sometimes this is explicit using the concept very deliberately, but at other times positive risk-taking may be subtle, implicit but at the heart of the way things are done. Here I am arguing that Intensive Interaction is one such example.

Intensive Interaction: Positive Risk-Taking in Action

If we look at risk-averse and risk-embracing approaches as on continuum we can see that risk-aversion is all about fear of things going wrong and about low expectations of success. The response is to protect, to control, often by being highly planned. Risk-embracing approaches in contrast are all about hope regarding what might be achieved. The response is to be trusting, to be prepared to take a leap of faith (see Butler, 2010), to be flexible and creative rather than pinning everything down in advance. It involves letting go somewhat and sharing in exploring the unknown.

For me, Intensive Interaction was, and is, about all of these risk-embracing things. In the early stages the letting go of control was painful at times. Dave will recall how as a new teacher I was capable of intricately designed teaching programmes with every angle pre-planned. I was taught to write, and deliver to, extremely tight targets and objectives. This in some ways minimises what can go wrong, except that we never quite get to see over Duncan's wall and out to the horizon.

When we 'do' Intensive Interaction we see people as 'at-promise' of being and becoming social, communicative beings. We ask 'what happens if' in a positive way. Intensive Interaction is often about getting things right at the micro level – it is about the minutiae of ordinary existence. Bakhtin (cited by Bell & Gardiner, 1998) argues that 'the most important events in life are not the grand, dramatic or catastrophic but the apparently small and prosaic ones of everyday life'. In this spirit, positive risk-taking is not all about big risk events, but about the small but vital ways in which risks are negotiated on a daily basis in classrooms, in bathrooms, and wherever we find ourselves. It is at the level of dyadic and small group interactions that risk-taking can be played out. For learners with the most profound intellectual impairments this is evident in every interactive interchange.

Individuals with profound and multiple impairments who do not yet use intentional or symbolic communication can be left out in the cold when it comes to enjoying social participation in classrooms. This can leave them without agency in terms of influencing what goes on around them or even unable to initiate interactions with others if those others are unable to interpret or 'read' their idiosyncratic non-intentional communications. As skilled interactive partners we, on a minute-by-minute basis, take a chance on what they might be wanting to communicate. Unintentional communication acts are more difficult to read and interpret than intentional and conventional ones (Dunst & Lowe, 1988). So, with these individuals, every behaviour interpreted as a communication is an act of positive risk-taking for their communication partner. We might have the interpretation wrong, but the benefits of having a go at interpreting, and thereby forging a communicative relationship, preoccupy us over the potential dangers. This is vital for establishing for that individual the notion of communicative effect (Wilcox, Kouri, and Caswell, 1990) and for preventing the extinction of pre-intentional and early intentional communication (Carter & Iacono, 2002: 178).

Conditions for positive risk-taking

If we go with the idea that positive risk-taking is an important dimension of our interactive work people with various and profound impairment then an obvious next question concerns how we can create the conditions in which this can thrive. There is a strong evidence base now for the efficacy of Intensive Interaction which takes away some of the pressure to prove the value of the approach. Performativity cultures, whether they be about the need to pass exams, meet targets, or demonstrate effectiveness, are not conducive to positive risk-taking.

What does support positive risk-taking is the kinds of educational frameworks that give people information, that clarify roles, and the provide guiding principles. The *See What I Mean* guidance (Grove *et al.* 1999, 2000) does just this in the realm of responding to potentially communicative behaviour and the Intensive Interaction approach does this more broadly. As one of my doctoral students and I have argued in relation to teachers supporting the playfulness of children with autism, this is facilitated by curricular frameworks that value play and provide practical strategies for encouraging it (see Theodorou & Nind, 2010). For children with profound impairment, Intensive Interaction provides a curricular framework and pedagogical guidance that supports teachers' self-belief in their judgements (Nind & Thomas, 2005) and the risks they take and benefits they accrue in treating apparently non-communicative behaviours as if they are communicative (Nind & Hewett, 1994). Outside of education, there are similar processes at work creating a supportive environment around the interactive partners.

In Intensive Interaction the non-disabled interactive partner works with guiding principles informed by theory and evidence, but without a prescribed plan or tight objectives. This requires venturing into the unknown. This is an adventure in creative listening for the non-disabled partner – hearing the potential ‘voice’ of the disabled person – and creative responding – working in the moment to decide where to take the interactive turn. For the disabled interactive partners too this engaging in such interactions is venturing into something new. They too are taking risks by opening themselves up and not knowing what will happen next. But, I cannot stress too strongly, there is nothing reckless about this because the interactive pair is immersed in a whole framework which is about sensitivity, emotional attuning and mutual enjoyment (Nind, in press). Positive risk-taking is not about being reckless. It is about creating a supportive environment in which it is safe to take risks, to explore, to find out who we are and what we can do.

Closing thoughts: Taking the concept forward

I have been working on Intensive Interaction for over two decades without properly thinking about this in terms of being about risk until the last couple of years. In the early stages of developing the approach the risks of moving away from the behavioural approaches of the time were keenly felt by us, as were the risks of advocating teaching that might involve touch and working against age-appropriate norms. But the benefits of doing so were what mattered - and so in hindsight this was positive risk-taking work.

One of my intentions today is to introduce the concept of positive risk-taking to a wide audience, including a new generation of Intensive Interaction practitioners. I am keen to find out whether sometimes conscious use of the concept is helpful. Concepts like mutual enjoyment, contingent responding, imputing intentionality, are some of our thinking tools when we do Intensive Interaction. We may use them consciously and sub-consciously, often moving between the two, but we need them to reflect with. I suggest to you that similarly, the concept of positive risk-taking is something we can reflect with.

Looking at Intensive Interaction from my perspective as a kind of critical friend these days it is my impression that the approach is at a critical point. There are drives to preserve the integrity of the approach as we first developed it using Ephraim's core premise. And there are drives to take it to new groups, to define and talk about it in new ways, and to practice in different ways. We can read the latter as risky. We can engage in 'what if' thinking in terms of 'what if it gets watered down too much', 'what if the essence of what makes it effective gets lost'. Or we can engage in 'what if' thinking of a different kind: 'what if we can do even more with this approach'.

I do not want us to take silly risks with Intensive Interaction or with the lives of the people affected by it. But I do want us to create safe environments for people to take risks with the approach, to be creative with it. We dared to 'think otherwise' (Ball, 1995) when we ventured on this path. I hope some of the learning at this conference can be about the life-course of Intensive Interaction as well as Intensive Interaction across the life course. I am keen to learn what it can become as much as what it can be.

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