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CONFERENCE REPORT

International Conference: Communication in the Context of Congenital Deafblindness – Ten Years of Study. How Knowledge and Practice Develop.
Groningen, The Netherlands. From 15 to 17 November 2016.

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On November 15, 16, and 17, 2016, the DbI Communication Network and the Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care organized an international conference at the University of Groningen[1] to mark the 10th anniversary of the Pedagogical Sciences Master's in Communication and Deafblindness. This event was sponsored by support facilities such as Royal Dutch Kentalis, Bartimeus, Norden (Nordic Centre for Welfare and Social Issues) Kalorama, and SWODB (Dutch Foundation for Scientific Research Deafblindness).

The DbI Communication Network consists of Marlene Daelman (Belgium), Flemming Ask Larsen (Denmark), Paul Hart (Scotland), Marleen Janssen (Netherlands), Anne Nafstad (Norway), Jacques Souriau (France), Inger Rodbroe (Denmark), and Ton Visser (Netherlands). Together they are responsible for the content of the Master's in Communication and Deafblindness at the University of Groningen.

There were 122 participants from 18 different countries from all over the world. The largest delegations came from Norway, Sweden, the Netherlands, Denmark, Belgium, and the United Kingdom. There were also representatives from Brazil, Canada, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Finland, France, Germany, Ghana, Malawi, the Russian Federation, Taiwan, and the United States of America.

It was an interesting program with plenary presentations, workshops, round table sessions, posters, and films.

Guests were welcomed by the Chair of the University Board, Prof. Sibrand Poppema during a welcoming reception in the beautiful Academy Building on the Broerstraat in Groningen. He told us that this Master's Program in Communication and Deafblindness, and the research related to it, was in his opinion one of the most interesting scientific areas connected to the Faculty of Behavioral and Social Sciences. He especially appreciated the impact it had on and the connection with society. "Complex problems can be solved by this kind of research," according to Poppema.

In addition, the new Dean of the Faculty, Prof. Kees Aarts, was fascinated by the videotapes presented by Anne Nafstad and Marlene Daelman during their keynote speech. Professor Alexander Minnaert welcomed the guests on behalf of the Department of Special Needs Education and Youth Care. He is more familiar with the content of the program, because he has collaborated on several PhD research projects about deafblindness.

[1] www.rug.nl

The conference was organized to study the theoretical perspectives used in the Master's program and to develop new topics. For an overview of the program, see the website: 10yearscdbmaster.nl.

The keynote presentation was provided by Anne Nafstad and Marlene Daelman, entitled: "Excursions into the richness of human communication: theory and practice during and before the 10 years of the international program on Communication and Congenital Deafblindness." They provided an overview of developments in the studies of the DbI Communication Network (formerly the Working Group on Communication) over the past 25 years, and where and how the Master's program is related to their work.

During that 25-year period, they worked together with scholars from various scientific disciplines. Marlene and Anne illustrated the different topics in a very interesting way using microanalysis of several sample videos. The topics addressed were well known to people in the deafblind field. The speakers also referred to the scholars who came to international conferences organized during those years.

This initiative all began at the 3rd IAEDB European Conference, Potsdam, Germany (1993) with the theme, "the personal contribution of the person with congenital deafblindness," a theme from developmental psychology and early communication development. In 1996, during the first Paris conference of the Communication Network, the themes 'immediate imitation', 'directedness to the other' and 'emergent self-other awareness' were the key topics. Jacqueline Nadel of the University of Paris brought the 'black book' which addressed the robust discovery of social directedness in humans from infancy. This book served as a great inspiration to the members of the Communication Network. Nadel brought her collaborators along to this Paris conference, including: Luigia Camaioni, Colwyn Trevarthen and Michel Delau. Bertil Bjerkan from Norway also made a point during that conference that there was a difference between social and communicative interaction, and that communicative interaction was always triadic and much more complex than social interaction.

The themes the Communication Network were interested in were focused around 'differentiating forms of social contact and different types of gestural sequences'. The video of 'Thomas and the blue tunnel' was viewed by Luigia Camaioni. She was invited to lecture about the difference between imperative and declarative gestural sequences. Camaioni pointed out an example of declarative referential gesturing and tactile pointing by Thomas, which inspired not only the Communication Network but also many people in the deafblind field.

After that discovery, attention focused on themes such as 'sustained conversation' and 'meaning making'. The scholars Georg Lakoff and Sarah Taub were also invited to speak. The tradition of cognitive linguistics in the US involved theories about embodied meaning in language. When Taub, a sign language linguist from Gallaudet University[2], applied the work of Scott Lidell to sign language analysis, she could immediately analyze the embodied cognitive image structures underlying the form of gestures and utterances.

At the same conference, Per Aage Brandt, a cognitive semiotician from Denmark, was invited to speak. He analyzed the possible meaning of utterances and signs using mental space theory. Flemming Ask Larsen, one of our Network members, is one of his students. This explains the place of both 'cognitive linguistics' and 'cognitive semiotics' in the Master's program. They involve tools that enable the analysis of potential meaning in communicative utterances that are difficult to understand.

Another new theme of the Communication Network was 'the discovery of Bodily Emotional Traces or BETs. Working together with colleagues, a Masters Student Gunnar

[2] www.gallauget.edu

Vege, systematically experimented with transforming embodiment theory into bodily tactile communicative practice with his pupil Ingerid. In the documentary film TRACES, the CRAB-sequence showed that there was a basic potential sign component embodied in this, which can be called a Bodily Emotional Trace or BET Since then, BETs have been described in several theses by Master's students.
The making of meaning is a very rich topic, and the Communication Network has already used terms such as 'co-creation' and 'negotiation about meaning' in their work.

In creating the Master's program, a proper theoretically grounded foundation or common theme is necessary. This was found in the theory of 'dialogicality', known from the Norwegian professor Ragnar Rommetveit with his orientation towards the Russian philosopher Bakthin. The Communication Network invited Ivana Markova and Per Linell, two of Rommetveit's collaborators, to speak. While still in the process of exploring the relevance of concepts, this theory has already appealed to many students. Through some of the studies, it has been found that people with congenital deafblindness engage in 'languaging' even though these individuals have very little language in the linguistic sense. They demonstrate a strong communicative agency in spite of very few linguistic skills; they can indicate when they feel that their voice is being heard.

Still, it is a big question how people with deafblindness can have access to culture in a way that is clear and systematic. Eija Lundqvist suggested and evaluated the procedure of tactile overhearing in multi-party interactions, an approach that seems to be very useful and that has been adopted by several Master's students.

But according to Marlene Daelman and Anne Nafstad the journey is not over yet. It is very important to stay focused on communication in terms of finding ways to stay in dialogue, in spite of asymmetry and tension. They believe the Master's program can boost the academic community's interest in studying the interesting theme of human communication further. This would mean studying it from a diversity perspective. People with deafblindness show individual and bodily tactile variations in universal core processes of human communication. Looking at this from a diversity perspective, this Master's program can be very useful for professionals who are interested in analyzing communication not only in persons with deafblindness but also in people with other disabilities and complex communication needs.

A response to the keynote presentation was given by Professor Wied Ruijssenaars of the University of Groningen was entitled: 'Congenital Deafblindness and human communication. Or how much is 6 x 9 again?' Wied Ruijssenaars complimented the work done in the International Master's in Communication and Deafblindness Program. He stated that in a relatively short period of time a 'knowledge explosion' had occurred thanks to the hard work of not only Master's students but also PhD students at the University of Groningen. Ruijssenaars was very positive about the research on meaning-making, and liked the micro-analytical methods of analyzing and evaluating with the new video and computer technologies used in the Master's program. He also liked the explicit connection to the macro-perspective of human communication and education. However, as a professor in the field of learning disabilities (his expertise), he also had some interesting critical points for consideration in the future: a) Examine not only co-constructivism but also direct and systematic instruction for learners with severe learning disabilities; b) consider that learning processes are helped by the analysis of possible intervention steps (Music mixer model, Ruijssenaars, 2005); and c) examine the same video samples from different theoretical viewpoints. Dialogical theory is an important source of inspiration, but do not overlook other theories.

The second plenary presentation was by Professor Ivana Markova, from the University of Stirling, Scotland. We are very familiar with her work from earlier conferences and seminars. Ivana Markova is always very enthusiastic about our Master's program; she even refers to it in her latest book (Markova, 2016)[3]. Markova was invited to talk about the methodological issues involved in transforming the dynamic nature of a dialogue into an empirical project. First, she started by explaining the main presupposition of dialogical perspectives: "the mind of the Self and the minds of Others are interdependent in understanding and creating meaning of social realities, as well as in interpreting the past, experiencing the present and imagining the future." Dialogical approaches have their origins in numerous theoretical traditions, starting with Socrates and Plato, up to contemporary approaches inspired by Bahktin, pragmatism by James and Mead, and hermeneutics and sociocultural theories based on Vygotsky.

Markova stated:"The problem of designing dialogical methods goes hand in hand with the theoretical issues of dialogicality. Dialogical approaches are holistic and dynamic, and analytical procedures go against the complexity of interactions in larger contexts and against their multivoicedness".

Markova further worked out several examples of how to generalize from single case studies. Case studies allow for theoretical generalization of research findings as well as for generalization of practices in professional services. One example of the concept 'dialogical learning' was worked out using the analysis of Frank Berteau in his Master's thesis (2010), where he came up with the concepts 'educational learning' and 'dialogical learning', along with the concepts of 'attachment trust' and 'dialogical trust'. According to Markova, these concepts can be applied and investigated using different Self-Other dyads, and applied to different learning situations. These kinds of concepts create additional opportunities for more advanced studies into the additional qualities of dialogical learning and the possibilities of theoretical generalization. She suggests that dialogical communication in congenital deafblindness makes it possible to reflect upon and discuss concepts that remain hidden in non-problematic communication.

The third plenary presentation was given by Professor Stephen von Tetzchner, University of Oslo, entitled 'Language Development: Valuable observations'. Because the full text will be presented later this summer, I will give a short summary here of the most important topics: language development and observations, meaning-making, initiating and replying to joint attention, first and third person perspectives, creating and understanding shared context, communicative affordances, internalizing and externalizing language, how to generalize, and scaffolding. The full text will be available later this year in the *Journal of Deafblind Studies on Communication* (jdbsc.rug.nl).

A response to the plenary presentation of Von Tetzchner was prepared by myself ,Marleen Janssen, University of Groningen, and entitled: 'Concepts of Von Tetzchner connected to Master's studies on communication'. First, I explained how the Master's program in Communication and Deafblindness is connected to Special Needs Education, the department where the program is organized. The types of studies done in this Master's program mainly involve case studies on communication and deafblindness. Every study makes a contribution to the evidence base of the deafblind field, where we are trying to establish 'evidence based practice', which means that methods are theoretically underpinned, evaluated in terms of their effects, and followed up by solid implementation. I linked several of Von Tetzchner's concepts to theses by Master's students, such as meaning-making, joint attention, from internalizing to externalizing, languaging, and scaffolding. An overview of Master's theses that cover other concepts such as social interaction, assessment,

[3] The Dialogical Mind: Common Sense and Ethics (Cambridge University Press 2016)

peer interaction, touch, gesturing, exploration, intervener support, dance, challenging behaviors, and identity construction, as well as an overview of the PhD theses on deafblindness from our research group in Groningen, were also provided. The topics covered include affective involvement, intersubjective meaning-making, dynamic assessment of communication, tactile strategies in communication, and motivation to learn. I then asked the audience to actively recruit new Master's students, and to write articles for *Deafblind International Review* and the *Journal of Deafblind Studies on Communication*. We need more PhD and postdoctoral research in our field, and international research collaboration is also necessary.

The fourth plenary presentation was delivered by Professor Shaun Gallagher entitled, 'Embodied intersubjective understanding and communication in congenital deafblindness'. We were not familiar with this scholar from any of the earlier conferences, but we did know him, because one of the Master's students, Kirsten Schou, used his theory on embodied cognition for her Master's project. Gallagher tried to explain three different theories regarding social cognition: Theory Theory, Simulation Theory, and Interaction Theory (Gallagher, 2017). He emphasized Interaction Theory as the most useful one for people who are deafblind. Interaction Theory sees mental states as being embodied and observable in interaction. Gallagher sees social cognition much more dialogically, which is evidenced by studies that distinguish between primary and secondary intersubjectivity. The capacity for direct perception of the intentions of others develops very early in life, and the development of joint attention somewhat later, which also includes the capacity for forming joint intentions for joint actions. Grounded in this basic intersubjectivity, a child without disabilities develops competency in communicative and narrative practices, which provide further resources for understanding others, without the necessity of mindreading.

Gallagher prepared for this conference by studying about blindness, deafness, and deafblindness. He found that action perception in blind and deaf individuals was different compared to individuals without disabilities, speculating that for persons who are deafblind, there may be a 'personal model' of social cognition that could be beneficial. He also referenced the work of McInnes and Treffry on 'intensive interaction'. His most concrete recommendation was to incorporate alternative forms of communication into the individual's own form of existence and to look at deafblindess as a complete form of existence.

Jacques Souriau and Kirsten Schou had the difficult task of following up on the Gallagher lecture and connecting it to the Master's program. In his introduction, Jacques Souriau connected the concepts of body-schema and body-image to the concept of Bodily Emotional Traces; the concept of imitation by a child vis-à-vis the concept of immediate imitation by the communication partner, and the role of space in gestures and language. In his response to the lecture, Jacques sparked some interesting discussions that elaborated on, differed with and complemented Gallagher's ideas.

While Gallagher is in favor of the Interaction Theory idea, Souriau stated: "In the Master's program there is a complementary tension between Interaction Theory and Theory Theory. When Interaction Theory fails, it is necessary to rely temporarily on Theory Theory strategies; that is, conscious inferences based on analyses of clues that are available and observable (i.e., actions, gestures, movements, facial expressions, linguistic utterances)". He referred to analytic tools that are based on the semiotic content of expressions, using the 6-space model, or their bodily construction using the Real Space Blend model, and the emphasis on the dynamics of joint attention.

Souriau concluded that there was consensus on several aspects: The dynamics that transform unconscious bodily processes into conscious cognition are crucial for symbolic developments, inseparability of gestures, space and linguistic forms in symbolic communication, and language and the necessity to find strategies to overcome low readability problems and the need for approaches that prepare for the understanding of narratives.

Kirsten Schou impressively illustrated several theoretical concepts with a video clip of her own student who is congenitally deafblind. She was able to analyze and explain this in a very detailed scientific manner.

The fifth plenary presentation was given by Professor Per Linell. The Communication Network knows Linell from earlier conferences; we use his book: "Rethinking Language, Mind and World Dialogically" as a handbook in the Master's program. In his presentation entitled 'Dialogue and the birth of the individual mind: with an example of deafblindness', he commented on the relationship between general dialogical theory and the analysis of interaction involving persons with congenital deafblindness. He used the video of Gunnar Vege and Ingerid with the CRAB as an example, concluding that, with regard to deafblindness, the following points of 'extended dialogism' are important: Dialogism is not limited to verbal language; it focuses on a broader range of sense-making activities, including the use of signs, gestures, practical actions, and sensory explorations of the outer world within reach; it accommodates the common feature of asymmetry between participants in communication, and the role of integration of perception and action is even more obvious in the case of touch than in making sense through other communicative resources. Per Linell ended his presentation with these remarks:
"In cases of communication with a person who is congenitally deafblind, it seems obvious that we cannot talk about entirely symmetrical and completely shared understandings."

During the conference, not only were there plenary presentations but also no fewer than 20 workshops conducted by Master's graduates and participants from other countries. The alumni covered many topics such as identity construction, affective involvement, creativity in dialogue, agency, the role of intervenors, discovering specific support needs, joint attention, meaning creation, graphic and tactile supports, action research and knowledge transfer, embodied cognition and intersubjectivity. Abstracts from these workshops are being published in the Special Issue on this conference in the *Journal of Deafblind Studies on Communication*[4].

The other participants were Carolyn Monaco from Canada, who gave a very interesting presentation about the Intervenor program for people with deafblindness at George Brown College[5] in Toronto, and Shirley Maia and Vula Ikonomidis from Brazil, who presented an overview of services at Ahimsa -Grupo Brasil[6] in Sao Paulo. Ingrid Korenstra gave a presentation about outdoor activities at Bartiméus in the Netherlands.

On the Wednesday and Thursday of the conference, round tables discussions were organized, in which alumni led discussions between participants and plenary speakers aimed at emphasizing the connection between theory and daily practice for people who are deafblind. These sessions were highly appreciated.

In addition to these activities, interesting poster sessions were presented every day, and stimulating films were screened. For an overview of the posters, see the JDBSC website. The

[4] jdbsc.rug.nl
[5] www.georgebrown.ca
[6] www.grupobrasil.org.br

films shown were: one film of over 100 years old from the Oberlinhaus in Potsdam[7], a film of the Rafaël school in Sint-Michielsgestel[8] in 1965; a film entitled 'Touché' offered by Jacques Souriau from France and two artistic films of André Ahrends from the Netherlands, entitled "First Encounter" and "Touched".

On Thursday, the last day of the conference, a social gathering was organized by the alumni in the evening. They put on a show in which they satirized all the different kinds of anecdotes about the lecturers in the Master's program that everyone enjoyed very much.

On a sadder note, the moment came that evening when we had to say goodbye to Inger Rødbroe and Ton Visser. They are stopping their work for the DbI Communication Network after more than 25 years. This conference provided the perfect event to do that with a special Lantern AWARD- ceremony. With a memorable speech by Anne Nafstad and a beautiful musical number by Marlene Daelman on the flute, the retiring members, Inger and Ton, were each presented with a nice lantern, because they shed their light on the content of communication for so many years. Guests went on to enjoy disco music and dancing until late in the evening.

(For more detailed information see website 10yearscdbmaster.nl and the Special Issue of Journal of Deafblind Studies on Communication (jdbsc.rug.nl)).

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[7] www.oberlinhaus.de

[8] https://www.kentalisonderwijs.nl/Rafael/