

How Filmmaking gives specific learning impairments a new perspective for informal education.

Introduction:

"The only thing we perceive is our own perceptions". (Lanza et al 2010:14)

'Perception' relates to how we interpret and decode information from the world around us. If human development and behaviour is concerned with one thing, one could argue that our perceptions influence what we think, *how* we think and how we interact with our fellow man and our habitat. Our perceptions through childhood and through adolescence are extremely important as it's in these early stages of life that we learn to make use of symbols, images and use tools like language to navigate through the world - any hindrance to this development could have a detrimental effect to 'cope' with life: it is this area i.e. "language" that I will explore through this assignment.

Kevin is 17 years old; he first approached The Rural Media Company in September 2014 applying for a place on our 2nd BFI Film Academy, a 'national scheme to help train and inspire the next generation of British filmmakers and offer training for every film industry role through regional centres' (Williams, N. K. 2015:1). Months after the Academy ended, I have continued my relationship with Kevin, keeping in regular contact, helping him fulfil his dream of working in the film industry, though careers advice, training, work experience and one-on-one mentoring. Kevin has to

manage a Specific Learning Impairment (SLI): an inability to master aspects of "language" and an inability to comprehend complex syntax and/or vocabulary (Bishop et al, 2015: 100). In Kevin's case, he specifically acknowledges having a distinct subgroup condition of SLI, '*Pragmatic Learning Impairment*'. I am going to analyse Kevin's cognitive and sociological development as well as outline any implications for his future and my practice that arise from this case study.

Methodology:

The BFI Film Academy is activity-led and film-centric: over 6 months students will meet industry professionals, explore their own strengths and weaknesses in filmmaking and eventually, group together to make a short film with help from an adult mentor. Additionally, all BFI students must explore and document their filmmaking through a Silver Arts Award qualification. The Academy met on a weekly basis to start with and met more frequently and for longer (full day sessions 10am-4pm) when they started planning their short film.

All of my primary research of this case study is anecdotal; a method that has been said to "...attempt to explain the phenomena of everyday life". (Lawrence-Mullings, S. 2014: 18/04/15). My secondary research on cognitive and sociological psychology endeavours to shed light on my experiences working with Kevin.

Background:

Before I explore Kevin's development to date, I will begin with our history...

My first contact with Kevin was through his application form; in it, he wrote about his passion for filmmaking and although had no previous experience, did submit a series of photographs to demonstrate his artistic talents.

I first learnt of Kevin's 'Pragmatic Learning Impairment' after he applied for a 2 week residential at the National Film and TV school (NFTS); an opportunity only afforded to successful BFI Film Academy students. Being eligible, Kevin competed with hundreds of students from across the UK hoping to be awarded a place. The NFTS application form required a reference from an adult - Kevin asked me to provide a reference. Quite interestingly, this took place 3 months into my work with Kevin, meaning that in his *original* application for the Academy, he failed, or purposely omitted his SLI - after a discussion with his parents, I realised it was the latter. It was during that conversation with Kevin's mum that she talked about his frustration with his language impairment and the shame he felt when having to face it. Throughout that conversation, his mum shared some of the difficulties Kevin faces in his BTEC course work at the Arts College - explaining that some abstract concepts such as 'form' 'composition' and 'beauty', are difficult to comprehend and articulate, especially when it comes to explaining his own processes behind his work.

In spite of my reference, Kevin didn't get selected for the NFTS residential: we

spoke about this briefly in an one-on-one meeting (31/01/15) and although disappointed, it was a chance for me to ask Kevin about his impairment. Kevin explained his difficulties concentrating when he's in a large group and how easy it is for him to get distracted. From experience, I have often found myself repeating information several times over, inadvertently using complex idioms such as *"You can kill two birds with one stone by testing different camera techniques, you'll be learning practical skills and contributing to your arts award portfolio"*. At the time I didn't realise that Idioms were difficult to grasp, which admittedly, left me frustrated with myself for failing to "teach" Kevin properly.

My last meeting with Kevin was 23/04/15, It had been just over a month since he graduated from our Film Academy and I asked him how he was feeling, to which he replied: *"I don't know, I guess I'm just wondering what to do next, like, how do I move on from here, I feel like although the BFI Academy was great and I really enjoyed it and learnt a lot, I feel like I've been dropped and I don't know what to do next."* This news really concerned me, we'd taken him on this 6 month journey, he'd met inspirational BAFTA winning filmmakers, made a film of his own and had a local screening at the Borderlines Film Festival 2015 and yet, he may as well be at square one - what now? Yes, it was a great experience but what does he do with it? Was this a failure of the programme or a symptom of his SLI? Is he having a hard time assimilating the experience into action or is the course designed in such a way that participants are left all fired up with nowhere to go?

After reflecting on my time with Kevin and looking into developmental psychology, I

can now begin to unpick my experience with my research.

Research & Discussion:

"Impairments in language do not occur in a vacuum, but rather have impacts on many aspects of development." (Bishop et al, 2015: 100). Psychologist Jean Piaget's seminal research into child development led to identifying four 'aspects' of the developmental process, (Beckett, C. & Taylor, H. 2009:63):

- Physical maturation
- Experience
- Social Transmission
- Equilibration

Two of these factors can describe how Kevin experienced the BFI Academy.

- Social Transmission - what we learn from other people, i.e. Kevin's peers, the industry professionals, myself and my colleagues etc.
- *Equilibration* is reached when a young person balances 'assimilation': interpreting the world with the knowledge they already have, and 'accommodation': changing our perceptions to accommodate something new (ibid:63).

The important thing to consider when looking at Piaget's work is that he believed that children's knowledge and understanding only progressed if there were the correct mental building blocks in place to assimilate and accommodate new knowledge i.e. to achieve equilibration. When I recall speaking with Kevin during sessions and repeating information to him several times, it could be assumed that he hasn't the same building blocks in place as the other students - which was isolating him from the learning, from his peers and from me (as I recall feeling frustrated at the time). The idea of Kevin's SLI existing inside a vacuum is quite implausible and Bishop et al's work on the learning impairments explains how this can create a negative spiral for the young person i.e. the young person cannot find the right words to communicate, finds it difficult to comprehend others, communication breaks down, young person and peers/teachers are reluctant to continue communicating and ultimately, effective coping strategies for the young person aren't discovered (Bishop et al, 2015: 100).

Being able to 'cope' with life experiences is critical for an adolescent, not coping would suggest that no progress is made and consequently, finding equilibration might be impossible. Thanks to Piaget's work, Benson et al focused their 2004 research on 'Positive Youth Development', chiefly concerned with the building blocks of *healthily* development (Coleman, J. 2010:209) focusing on how healthy teenagers implement coping strategies to manage study, social groups, family, bereavement, physical changes, pending responsibilities of adulthood... could we add SLI's on to this list as another aspect to 'cope' with? If no two children's lives are the same, since they perceive the world in their own way ('I think, therefore I

am' (Atkinson 2011:116-122)), it can be accepted that each individual adolescent has to deal with their own unique blend of negative aspects. If this is the case, would this suggest that young people with SLI's only struggle because they haven't managed to cope? Or is having an SLI something extra that puts more pressure on regular stressors of adolescent life?

Hodapp (1998:54) would suggest that it is the latter - after comparing the development of children with and without SLI's, there was evidence to say that rates of development vary and children with SLI's, like Kevin, still develop, but it is dependent on the *context* of their development and their support and encouragement built around them.

In Kevin's case, I would say that he has additional support to help him cope with his SLI and since learning about his impairment, I've tried hard to help him keep up with his peers: starting with Kevin's reference for the NFTS. Kevin wasn't successful, however I wanted to write something to encourage him and help him interpret his SLI as a positive aspect of adolescence rather than a negative one. In his reference I quoted Poet Fredrick Von Hardenberg as I believe Kevin's SLI enables him to make "...the familiar strange." (Cockburn, A. 07/05/15). This led me to think of Sir Francis Bacon who once wrote "God forbid that we should give out a dream of our own imagination for a pattern of the world." (Bacon, F. 1620(1955 ed:451)). Bacon wrote this in relation to his "False Idols" theory: an explanation of how we perceive the world, notably, Bacon's third Idol was "Idols of the marketplace" which is the distractions which arise from the ways in which we use *words*. Could it be that in

trying to following the false idols of language, Kevin is distracted from perceiving the world in his own unique way and thus obscuring his artistry? I like to think so.

Conclusion and Recommendations:

The next time we meet, Kevin and I will be going over his NFTS application, at his request, he wants to learn why he didn't get selected for the residential. This is fantastic progress; Kevin not only wants to embrace his set backs but in doing so, will open up some new ways of coping with the negative aspects of his SLI. From my research and first hand experience, young people with SLI's *do* have extra difficulty in certain areas of their own comprehension and use of language - meaning that the only way to cope is to build stronger coping mechanisms. I think to continue supporting Kevin, I need to adopt Bensons et al's Positive Youth Development theories (Coleman, J. 2010:209) and help him realise that his SLI can be a strength and not a weakness.

The final implications of this study have to be focused around my organisation and our BFI Film Academy. Are the difficulties Kevin faced a symptom of the project or a bi-product of his SLI? Many other members of our Academy have successfully gone on to find work in the industry, several have already found employment with us at Rural Media, and some even starting their own business as freelance filmmakers. This is a wonderful result for the young people and our organisation; the multitude of success stories strengthens our funding bid for the continuation of the project into 2016. However, all of these students haven't reported or displayed symptoms of

SLIs, my research does suggest that more work needs to be done in building preventative measures so young people like Kevin don't feel so lost after the project ends. If we run this Academy for a 3rd time, I will build in more career development sessions and give participants the option to go for a Bronze Arts Award instead of a Silver, which is less work and easier to manage.

Ultimately, research around SLI's isn't currently at an acceptable standard and researching Kevin's sub category impairment "Pragmatic Learning Impairment" has been difficult. A "one-size-fits-all" approach to supporting young people is potentially damaging and if Informal Educators are to truly be a benefit to young people, there needs to be more information and training about young people with SLIs and how they perceive the world.

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Williams, N.K. (2015) Me4 - Assignment 2 - Analyse your approach to leadership
and management in a situation within your practice which you have recently found
challenging. How did your values affect your management of the particular situation
and would you do anything differently in the future? YMCA George Williams
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