

Imagining Autism Introduction

BACKGROUND

Imagining Autism, is a project based at the University of Kent. Its origins were the initiative of two drama lecturers (Nicola Shaughnessy and Melissa Trimmingham), both of whom had sons with autism. Their personal experience of living with autism and using play based approaches at home led to conversations with psychologists on the potential of drama as a research tool for working with autism. In 2010, they began working in a local special school (St Nicholas, Canterbury) with seed funding from Kent “Ideas factory” to run interactive drama workshops using puppetry and play to engage with autistic children, many of whom had minimal language. The development of the “pod”, a tent like structure to contain a series of themed multi-sensory scenic environments emerged in the context of a classroom environment. Having received Kent’s Innovative project of the year award (2011), the researchers successfully applied to the Arts and Humanities Research Council for a 3 year programme to develop the work in local schools and to evaluate the effectiveness of the methods, working with psychologists specializing in autism and intervention (Prof Julie Beadle-Brown, Tizard and Dr David Wilkinson, Psychology). From 2011-2014, Kent’s interdisciplinary team of drama researchers, practitioners and psychologists, undertook a programme of practice based work to investigate the potential of drama an intervention for autism. Working in three special schools with 7-12 year olds, the team ran weekly 45 minute workshops spending one term in each school. The portable pod was developed as an immersive environment with five themed settings rotating throughout the term (forest, underwater, arctic, outer space, under the city). Adapting approaches derived from teaching performance practice and the play based methods developed in the pilot project, the drama practitioners used developed and delivered training for arts workers and teachers as well as a programme of public engagement (including producing an experimental film documentary). The evaluation by psychologists produced evidence that these approaches can facilitate communication, social interaction and imagination in children with autism with statistically significant results in key areas such as emotion recognition.

WHO

In addition to the original core team members, the project has a series of associate members: Hannah Newman (PhD studentship, supervised by whole team and with Dr Yvonne Parks, Consultant Pediatrician, Kent NHS; thesis explores the potential of the methods as a tool in diagnosis), Annette Foster (PhD student with a diagnosis of Aspergers, exploring the experience of women on the spectrum); Jennifer Leigh (UEL, creative research methods and evaluation) and Lisa Richardson (Tizard: autism & well-being, inclusion & community participation). There is also a group of professional practitioners associated with the project and trained to deliver the practice.

WHAT

The novel approach involves using participatory theatre methods -essentially play based improvisation, imitation and intensive interaction (working with puppets, objects and interactive media) within themed multi-sensory themed environments contained in the “pod” (a portable tent like structure that we take into schools or community settings). There is a loose narrative structure (guided improvisation) rather than a script with participants

supported to work creatively as co-producers. The approach is flexible and has been adapted for working across the spectrum of age ranges (4-18) and abilities. In a residency at the Atkinson Arts Centre (March 2017), the team successfully worked with participants ranging from non-verbal participants (of various ages) to sixth form students with Aspergers. iA training programmes emphasise the importance of imaginative engagement with autism (walking in shoes), following cues and scaffolding responses “in the moment”, and working creatively with everyday materials.

Mixed methods of evaluation were used for the original project (quantitative and qualitative) and a clinical trial is proposed for future research,

Outreach & public engagement programmes

Imagining Autism for families

Parents and siblings visit the pod on campus and are able to use the methods at home. Ran during 2015/16 (University of Kent, Public Engagement)

Imagining Autism for Professionals: Walking in Shoes

Presentations & workshops originally conceived for inset training at NAS schools.

Subsequently developed in response to invitations from arts venues, professional conferences etc. Builds on the distinctive training approach for Imagining Autism with exercises designed to facilitate understanding of the experience of autism, particularly differences in sensory processing and perception. Events are for professionals who work with people with autism, including teachers, childcare professionals, arts workers and healthcare professionals.

Imagining Autism for families: Autism at play & autism cafes

As parents of autistic children themselves, Professor Nicola Shaughnessy and Dr Melissa Trimmingham demonstrate how aspects of the play based approach can be applied at home as well as inviting families to share and discuss their own experiences. Originally conceived for an event at the Marlowe Theatre (“Lifting the Curtain”) workshops for families were part of a programme of work for a residency at the Atkinson Centre, in Southport with autism cafes running as an after school session in the library and as an afternoon session for parents at one of the participating schools.

Media features

New Scientist: 15/04/2014

<http://www.newscientist.com/article/dn25419-drama-helps-kids-with-autism-communicate-better>

Meridian TV (20/03/2014)

news feature includes an interview with a parent

<http://www.itv.com/news/meridian/update/2014-03-20/new-research-to-help-autistic-children-communicate/>.

Interdisciplinary research and Imagining Autism (Jasper Bouverie)

youtu.be/CTvVnktO5yA

FURTHER INFO

Film documentary: *Imagining Autism Now I See the World* (Routledge Performance Archives). Short film on the project which offers an insight into the methods (30 mins) that can be accessed privately on Vimeo with the password IA. <https://vimeo.com/129753703>

KEY PUBLICATIONS

Journal Articles

Beadle-Brown, J. et al (2017 forthcoming), 'Imagining Autism: Feasibility of a Drama-Based Intervention on the Social, Communicative and Imaginative behavior of Children with Autism.' *Autism: International Journal of Research and Practice*.

Trimingham, M & Shaughnessy N. (2016) 'Material Voices: Intermediality and Autism,' *Research in Drama Education: the Journal of Applied Theatre and Performance*, 21.3, 2016,

Trimingham, M & Shaughnessy N. (Forthcoming 2017) 'Imagining the ecology of autism', *Applied Theatre Crossings (ATC) - an annual Journal in Chinese and English*

Chapters in Books

Shaughnessy, N (2017 forthcoming), "Do you See what I see? Arts, Science and Evidence in Autism Research", in M Reason and N Rowe (eds), *Elusive Evidence: Documenting, Measuring and Evaluating Arts Practice in Social Contexts*. London: Bloomsbury Methuen

Shaughnessy, N. and M. Trimingham (2016). 'Autism in the Wild: Bridging the Gap between Experiment and Experience', in P. Garrett (ed.), *The Cognitive Humanities: Embodied Mind in Literature and Culture*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Shaughnessy, N. (2016) 'Curious Incidents? Pretend Play, Presence and Performance Pedagogies in Encounters with Autism', in P. Smagorinsky (ed.), *Creating Positive Social Updrafts through Play and Performance: Fostering Creativity and Community among Autism-Spectrum Youth*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan

Trimingham, M (forthcoming 2017) 'The ecology of Autism: vibrant space in Imagining Autism' in *Scenography expanded: contemporary perspectives on performance design* ed. by Joslin McKinney and Scott Palmer

Trimingham, (forthcoming 2017) 'Surprised by Beauty: Imagining Autism' in *Anthropology and Beauty: From Aesthetics to Creativity* ed by Stephanie Bunn, Informa Ltd., London

Trimingham (2013) 'Touched by Meaning: Haptic Affect in Autism' in *Affective Performance and Cognitive Science, Body, Brain and Being* ed. Nicola Shaughnessy London: Bloomsbury, pp.229-240