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Beyond the Drug Box:

The Integration of Motivational Interviewing Counselling Techniques with
Drama Based Methods in Substance Misuse Work with Educationally &
Behaviourally Disordered Children.

Background to the Project

Substance misuse education in schools in England and Wales usually falls within the orbit of Personal, Social and Health Education, conducted by a non-specialist teacher who has a broad remit; substance misuse is covered as part of physical well-being (Qualifications, Curriculum & Assessment Authority for Wales 2000).

Often this will take the form of a visit from the local police community liaison officer with the police drug box: this is the large glass fronted portable case containing labelled samples of various illegal drugs. A typical session will be extremely didactic, lecturing with an emphasis on the negatives such as health effects and legal penalties – what is often described as a ‘scared straight’ style. The underlying approach is ‘just say no’, rather than any kind of exploration of young people’s beliefs, values or experiences around the subject.

While this may come under the heading of prevention, service provision for the under 25 age group in general is mostly non-existent; even where such services exist they are likely to be an add-on to adult substance misuse services which are in turn generally

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clinical in orientation focussing on medical treatment for 'hard' drugs users rather than on alcohol or softer drugs. In an attempt to remedy this deficit a South Wales voluntary sector counselling agency (Gwent Alcohol Project) has set up an off shoot project named FUSION: the explicit brief of FUSION is to provide information, support and counselling to young people with concerns about their own or someone else's substance use.

Motivational Interviewing in Brief

Motivational Interviewing (M.I.) is a human centred counselling technique originally developed within the field of substance misuse (Miller & Rollnick 1991). Building on what might be considered standard humanistic counselling approaches (see Rogers 1965) M.I. provides a series of concrete communication techniques derived from the actual practice of practitioners found to have the most successful outcomes in terms of clients changing and maintaining change in their behaviour. A mass of research evidence now supports the efficacy of this approach (see the website of the Motivational Interviewing Network of Trainers for an indicative listing) and it has extended out from substance misuse to any area revolving around motivation and the changing of behaviour, including diet, physical exercise (Rollnick, Mason & Butler 1999) and even sexual offending.

The core concepts of the style are the humanistic values of respect for the other person and their right and ability to make autonomous choices in an informed manner. The role of the counsellor or worker in M.I. is to facilitate the process of the client exploring their thoughts and feelings around some problematic behaviour (although it is not necessary for the client to see the behaviour as problematic at the beginning of the process). It is not the role of the worker to solve the client's problems or push a

particular strategy; instead the client is aided to find their own strengths and abilities and their own reasons to change or not change through a process of (verbal) exploration. In the sense of its core values, Motivational Interviewing shares many of the principles of person-centred education and many of the aims of educational drama.

Abervalley School

The name of the particular establishment has been changed, but Abervalley is a large comprehensive school serving a relatively deprived post-industrial catchment area in Newport, South Wales. It has a special educational unit for children classed as EBD and a teacher there, Mr. Able, had identified a need for drug and alcohol education with this group. Children classed as EBD are considered to suffer from range of difficulties spanning social maladaptation to abnormal emotional stresses (Department for Education 1994) although there is not necessarily any implication of lower IQ.

It was felt by Mr. Able that a 'traditional' drugs box approach was unlikely to be successful with this group of young people for reasons including their attentional difficulties and negative views toward the police. FUSION were approached because of their overt focus and an existing consultancy arrangement with Ignition Creative Learning was brought to bear to integrate dramatic methodologies with Motivational Interviewing.

The Original Plan

The plan was for FUSION to be involved over a six-week period, entering into the special unit within the school for a period of one hour maximum per week. The aim was to explore the values and experiences of the young people in the empathic, respectful non-

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judgemental manner that characterises Motivational Interviewing, without appearing in the eyes of the school authorities to condone problematic behaviours or attitudes by refusing to condemn them. This difference between a more usual 'just say no' approach as epitomised by the drug box approach and the facilitative stance encouraging personal autonomy and decision making from a basis of harm reduction was a source of tension throughout our involvement in Abervalley.

A six-session programme was devised with the overall aim of producing a (maximum) 30-minute performance for show at a youth related drug and alcohol event organised by a local umbrella group of organisation with a youth or child brief. Our thinking was that this type of event caters for the people who arguably need it least: the motivated 'good kids' chosen by teachers as representatives of their school. The Abervalley youths, who were probably at much higher risk of serious substance misuse and less well equipped to deal with it would usually be excluded from such a self-selecting event.

Our aim therefore was to explore issues of substance use and misuse through the process of developing the performance itself, devising the material from the experience and understanding of the participants. A Forum theatre element of audience interaction was also planned (Boal 1979). This is a model Ignition has successfully applied to work with adults experiencing serious substance related difficulties and enables marginalised or disenfranchised groups to become advocates for themselves through theatre.

A brief outline of the original programme plan follows in order to illustrate how practice then had to evolve to 'on the run' in order to respond in the most effective way possible for our client group.

Week 1 Introductions, beginning of relationship building, setting of boundaries

Week 2 Exploration of the subject and generation of initial material

Week 3 Generation of material

Week 4 Content established, rehears performance, develop audience interactional elements

Week 5 Dress rehearsal, fine-tuning

Week 6 Half hour performance at substance misuse event.

Although this structure was tight, we believed initially that it would be possible to achieve the outcome of a performance within the six weeks.

The Plan & The Practice

Session1

The plan was to introduce ourselves, and conduct a warm up to learn names before beginning to introduce techniques used to generate material. Film Freezes asks small groups to create a still image of a well-known film title or scene, similar to Boal's (1992) image work. The groups were then given the specific titles of 'Drinking' and 'Taking Drugs' to construct images as a starting point for discussion.

Some immediate difficulties were apparent. The space for the work was a regular classroom full of classroom impedimenta; we were unable to establish immediately that this was 'our space' for the duration of the session, where special rules and expectations of conduct may apply. Taking immediate control of the group was also problematic as there was no clear introduction or hand over from the staff member 'in charge' (Mr. Able), and accordingly no clear hand back to him at the close of the session.

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Overall, the session seemed positive, and we had the basis of some material in the images of substance abuse, but Mr. Able appeared somewhat ambivalent at the approach, despite having been involved in requesting it.

Session 2

The session opened with Zip Zap Bop, a common warm up where a gesture and concurrent sound pass the energy around or across the circle, or bounce the energy back to where it came from. The exercise obviously fulfilled the usual warm up functions (see for example Johnston 1998) but we also attempted to use it as a metaphor for the process of the entire work. Thus, the group members were asked what skills they were using to play the game (e.g. concentration, body language, eye contact) and then asked if they could see any links between these things and the skills necessary to work with drama. The results of this processing were limited, but allowed an early attempt to provide affirmations to the boys: in Motivational Interviewing terms this is not saying 'I think you did that well' but is an attempt to identify and present back the positives or abilities a person is presenting but may not be aware of.

Our initial time table was slipping away already by this session: The composition of the group varied slightly from the previous event, a pattern that would be repeated, and the two sub groups re-formed the 'Drinking' and 'Taking Drugs' images only with great reluctance. In a Motivational Interviewing framework such resistance is conceptualised as a product of the interaction between worker, client and possibly the situation. We attempted to work with this reluctance in an M.I. way, i.e. 'rolling with resistance' rather than trying to force our agenda. While this was productive in terms of not

inflaming the situation and continuing to maintain the rapport we needed to work effectively, it threw up the question of a conflict between the facilitative style of M.I. and the more 'directive' style associated with drama and theatre work in terms of producing and refining material.

We were able to introduce several theatrical notions in this session. Character was brought in by asking the group members to name the figure they were representing in the frozen image and by asking them to create relationships and a context to the image. The intention was that this core could be expanded later by developing scenes from the basis of the images. Our parallel aim of drugs education was furthered by processing the Frozen Pictures: using the distancing device of character the individuals in the image were asked simply to produce a thought and a feeling for that character.

These comments were explored using Motivational Interviewing techniques of reflection, summary and affirmation in order to encourage the group to speak honestly without their fear of being 'off message', i.e. not saying what Mr Able might want to hear. Finally, we were attempting to inculcate an awareness of stage space and audience space by actually delineating these areas and the consequent rules attached to them.

Session 3

Following a plan of gradually increasing the complexity of what we asked, the session opened with Zip Zap Bop once more but played to a higher standard; that is with clearer gestures required, and faster and more accurate responses encouraged. By now (advised by Mr. Able) we were adopting a style of attempting to constantly draw the group back to

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task focus in a very direct way, mixed with a lot of praise and encouragement, which we still felt, was productive.

At this point we were still attempting to follow our aim of developing a performance piece. The behaviour of the group members over the previous two sessions had made clear that the level of trust usual to a theatrical endeavour was clearly reduced here; we therefore emphasised trust by playing 'The Tree That Sways But Does Not Fall', a game where one person is closely supported by the other group members in a tight circle as the central person 'sways' and is caught and passed around by the circle. Although we had only one hour minus set up and get out times, we felt the attempt to foster closer group relations among this fractious collection of individuals was worth the time; it was emphasised that the people in the circle were responsible for the safety of the person in the middle of the circle. The boys actually responded well to the demands of this exercise.

Moving on, we attempted to redo the Frozen Pictures we already had, developing them into a three-picture sequence of Before During and After. The central 'during' picture was already formed as the original Drinking/Taking Drugs image so we were in effect attempting to produce a skeletal narrative (see figure 1) which considered the antecedents and consequences of a given piece of behaviour; substance use in this case. The FUSION workers were also becoming more comfortable with an increased directive style in terms of getting the drama work done.

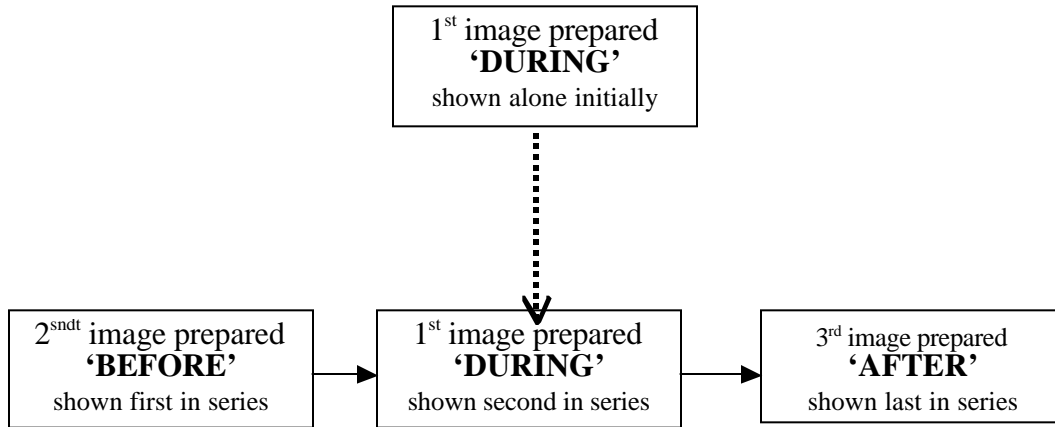
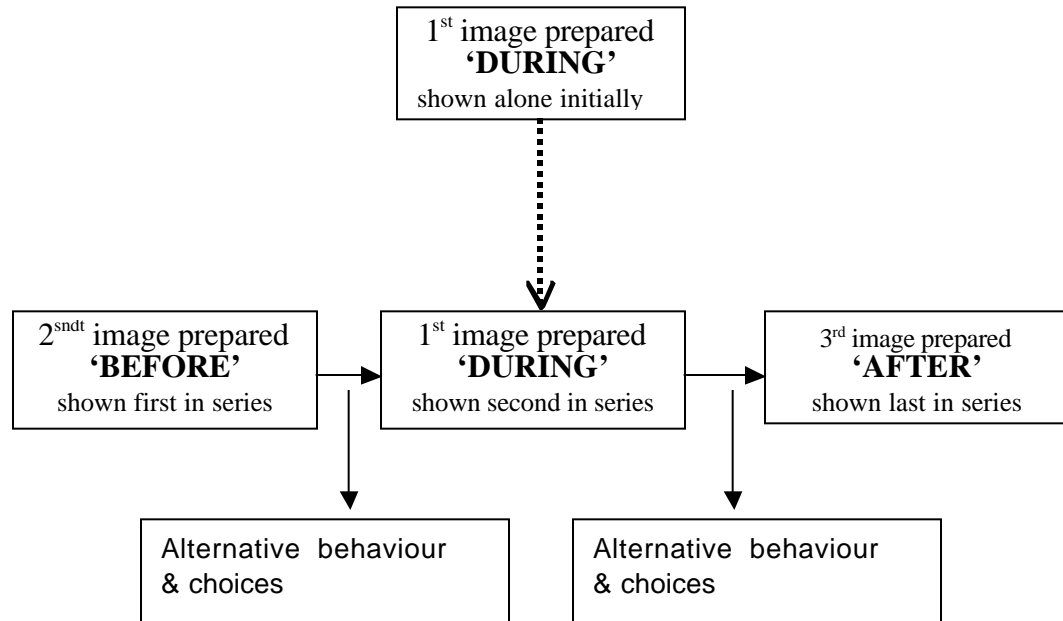


Figure 1

The 'Drinking' picture developed into a sequence of arguments at home followed by a pub session, concluding with confused images of violence, arguments, vomiting and being drunk to the point of unconsciousness. The 'Taking Drugs' image developed into a stereotypical drugs deal culminating once more in unconsciousness. Although these narratives were lacking in originality, they may well have reflected the experience of this group and were in any case material for discussion of attitudes, belief, and experiences. The pictures also provided a concrete referent for the exploration of alternative behaviours, should we be able to explore these (see figure 2).



(Figure 2)

Overall of course this sequence follows the Antecedent – Behaviour – Consequence structure familiar from cognitive-behavioural therapy and which is at the core of Home Office work in the criminal justice sector attempting to remedy ‘cognitive deficits. Of impulsivity and lack of consequential thinking with offenders (Blud 1999).

Session 4

By this stage, it was apparent that a real time pressure was emerging if we were to develop a performance piece for the projected weekend event. Applying Motivational Interviewing principles, we reconsidered whether this aim (the performance piece) was attainable or appropriate for the group: were we pushing them toward our solution? The decision was that rather than attempt to force the process we would have two parallel plans. The first assumed a productive drama based session where we could explore and

develop the material further. The second plan assumed that this would not be possible and contingent upon the group's behaviour a guided discussion would take place.

In the event, this is what occurred, the session coming its closest yet to a 'standard' drugs education discussion on experiences and views of drug use. Mr. Able was also apparently feeling unsure with the process and voicing concerns – sometimes requiring 'more structure' in terms of drama and others more discussion which in turn led to charges of sessions being 'unfocussed'. These feeling were to culminate later in the process.

Session 5

By this point, FUSION's involvement with the Abervalley group had been extended to ten sessions, going beyond the half term point. The decision was made to drop the idea of the performance piece on the grounds that at the Xpress 2001 event the Abervalley boys would be exposed to judgement for young people from a more inclusive background and were likely to be overwhelmed by the whole experience in a negative sense.

Session 5 also had the bifurcation of plans: in the event that the boys appeared willing to work dramatically, we would continue to build material, developing the narrative as a vehicle for exploring the issues. Failing this (and what took place) was a recognition exercise entitled 'What Am I'? Using A4 colour photos of various substances, FUSION staff led the group in matching drug names to the picture. This is clearly similar to the 'drugs box' but differing crucially in that the Motivational Interviewing approach required the boys to make links to personal experience and knowledge, exploring their opinion rather than simply 'telling' about effects and so forth. This cognitive 'depth of

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processing' is more likely to result in comprehension in the sense of understanding *meanings* rather than simply recalling 'facts' (Bloom 1956).

Session 6

Following the half term break, we explored the retention and comprehension of the boys through the use of continua. In Motivational Interviewing a common technique is to ask someone to scale their feelings about something – confidence for example – with 1 as not confident and 10 as completely confident. This method was applied to the group setting but physicalising the scale, so that positions were designated as 1 and 10 and the boys asked to place themselves on a position on this 'line' which reflected their feelings or knowledge. The subject here was harmfulness, comparing and contrasting substances in order to give information and correct misunderstandings. The physicalisation of the exercise rather than doing it through abstract discussion was an attempt to increase the likelihood of the boy's involvement: it is a dramatic commonplace that kinaesthetic activity can aid learning (see for example Moreno 1964). The intention was also to take a Polaroid of the resulting line up to again provide a visual concrete reference for future discussion.

Session 7

The intention was to resume the use of continua, exploring legality, harm, and so forth using the visual aids of the A4 drugs pictures. This was in response to a feeling from Mr. Able that more information giving was required. The session thus began as a general discussion but soon was led by Mr. Able to focus especially on steroid use. This had not been part of the session plan, and FUSION workers felt that the conduct of this session exemplified some of the unresolved tensions mentioned above in terms of a difference

between Mr Able and FUSION workers in comfort or discomfort with the style of working and the 'message' or lack thereof. These tensions were to be made explicit in the next session.

Session 8

The plan was to use the Polaroids of the frozen pictures to stimulate discussion in two groups about the risks that the various characters were taking. However, there had been an 'incident' before the lesson and the mood of the group seemed excitable, Mr. Able suggesting that FUSION staff forget the warm-up exercise because the boys were 'lively'. During the course of the session an argument and physical confrontation broke out between two boys who were then removed from the room.

Perhaps not surprisingly the session then completely disintegrated, leaving FUSION workers to feel that it would probably have been better not to attempt a session in that atmosphere, had they been adequately warned. On this occasion links between the unit staff and FUSION seemed to fail as Mr. Able appeared distracted from the start due to what had gone on before and was thus possibly not as supportive of FUSION as he had been on previous occasions. Mr. Able was clearly uncomfortable and felt that the work had provided a 'platform for bravado' and appeared unsure of the worth of it. It seemed that the non-judgmental nature of the FUSION approach was clashing with some other value of 'education' as Mr Able saw it.

Session 9

Returning to more theatrical approaches, the aim was to apply the hotseating technique of theatre in education. A number of character briefs were prepared and the intention

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was that FUSION staff would play the said character while another member of staff facilitated the discussion. The characters of course represented a variety of drug users and social classes.

In the classroom itself a surprise was waiting in the form of a senior police officer who happened to have dropped in and would 'observe' the session. Bearing in mind the attitudes of the young people present, this could have been a major inhibiting factor, and in fact the hotseating exercise did not go well, they not being willing to engage.

Demonstrating the flexibility associated with improvisational drama and Motivational Interviewing, we turned immediately to another exercise derived from Forum. Asking the boys to give us characters and a situation of drug use produced two people on a park bench. A scene was improvised up to the point where drug use (in this case cannabis) was about to occur, and the action was then frozen. Using the techniques of asking for thoughts and feelings the characters filled in information as to what their inner intentions were and the audience was then canvassed as to what the character being offered drugs could do.

It is important to note that this is not 'just say no' brought to life: the suggestion was given that the character smoke the drug and this as acted upon. The need then is to illustrate possible consequences rather than disallow a mooted course of action. Having a senior police officer in the room became useful at this point as he was invited into the stage space and a lively discussion ensued about what would happen to the two characters if a police officer did spot them. Thus the legal perspective was delivered in a way that the boys could engage with, rather than simply be negative about the officer before them.

Once warmed up in this way, one or two of the boys actually volunteered to enter into the scene and try out various behaviours or solutions. Hence an element of peer group education entered in, and the self-esteem and confidence of the volunteer was boosted. One over all intention of the intervention had been to boost skills such as negotiation or assertiveness through role-play: this successful session illustrated the potentials even with a group as difficult to engage as the Abervalley boys. Session 9 formed the last of the substantive drama based work with Abervalley.

Session 10: Evaluations

Evaluation with this client group was problematic, the usual paper and pencil based quantitative approach not being particularly 'user friendly' in this instance and the common quantitative tool of observation schedules for changes in behaviour not being applicable. Session 10 therefore took the form of the boys working through a 'drugs quiz' presented in a fun style rather than as 'evaluation' and also intended to try and consolidate the learning. Following this session there was a later final 'reward' trip to a hi-tech event organised by Gwent Constabulary, but again focusing on a 'just say no' message.

The main evaluative tool was discursive as the collaborative, discursive style pursued throughout the programme enabled a targeted discussion or unstructured interview to be facilitated. Cohen & Manion (1989) see an unstructured interview as one with a particular area of interest, the interviewer being free to decide the content, sequence and emphasis of the questioning as seems appropriate. For Robson (1993) this style of

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interview is a 'semi structured' interview, the defining characteristic being its 'clearly defined purpose'.

The freedom offered by this format was felt to be in the spirit of Motivational Interviewing and allow use of the skills held by the Fusion team as M.I. practitioners. Additionally it avoided bracketing the experience as 'evaluation' and opened the possibility of using the exchange (the interview) to 'deepen' the understanding an interviewee has of the situation or issue to which the interview refers (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh 1994), in this case drug and alcohol education.

Key questions focussed on a number of issues: the young people's opinions on alcohol and drug education; why young people use alcohol and drugs and what influences young people's behaviour in relation to alcohol and drug use. These were devised beforehand and fed into the discussion. The picture cards featured in earlier sessions were reintroduced as a method of checking recognition and knowledge. Finally, the school staff that had been involved throughout was questioned using the same structure as to their feelings regarding the project.

The discussion indicated a shift in attitude towards harder drugs such as ecstasy, heroin or solvents. The latter is of particular importance since it is of course easily available to this group and has the most deleterious health effects. The FUSION workers also felt that the tone of the young peoples discussion as more considered than previously and that overall the level of knowledge and awareness towards substance use had improved (see figure 3).

Table 1

Discussion

Despite an apparently intermittently supportive attitude to the methods, Mr Able felt that the project had been successful overall. The occasional value clashes served to warn that clearer communications were needed in setting up such interventions, but FUSION will be returning to Abervalley to work within the main school.

A major methodological flaw is the lack of a base line assessment before the intervention; without this it is of course difficult to say whether there was any more or less learning than with the drug box approach. However, since a major reason for the involvement of FUSION was a fear about the efficacy of the drug box style with this group, we can assume that at least learning was no less.

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