

Erika Mangialardi & Sarah Murphy

Opinion

Student SLTs Erika Mangialardi and Sarah Murphy share an innovative approach to supporting people with aphasia while furthering their own learning

The iCafe group catch-up



ILLUSTRATION BY Sara Gelfgren

Earlier this year, as the pandemic struck and our final clinical placements at the University of Essex could not go ahead as planned, we looked for alternative ways to support patients' communication while gaining clinical experience. We found many Facebook groups for stroke survivors and people

with aphasia and felt that our role was to offer these people a safe place to share their stories and practise their communication skills. As we were particularly interested in teletherapy, we thought that an online group could be a great solution to make the difficult days of lockdown more enjoyable.

We set up the 'iCafe group on Zoom', an online communication group comprising four or five participants and two facilitators. At first we were hesitant about people's willingness to use the necessary technology to access a group such as this, but we couldn't have been more wrong.

Our sessions have included games, fun activities, music and conversation topics. No therapy goals were implemented. Participants were free to join discussions or to remain silent and observe the session, contributing when they felt confident to do so. Although conversations were mainly led by us, the main goal was to allow space for people in the group to take the lead and propose conversation topics that were meaningful for them.

"...we thought an online group could be a great solution"

Participants have enjoyed being part of the initiative, returning each week to Zoom to take part. They have been willing to share their stories and seem very engaged in trivia quizzes and visual imagery sensory activities. Their personal strategies to effectively communicate their message during the sessions have included writing via the Zoom 'chat' feature, showing pictures on their phones, and speaking slowly and clearly.

It has been very rewarding to provide an opportunity for participants to interact with each other and have real conversations. From a clinical point of view, it reached the last step of therapy sessions: people were communicating with each other in a new environment using their strategies and forgetting

about the label of their disability.

The passion we used to plan the session materials and the strategies we learned to keep the conversations flowing were invaluable for our clinical experience. Sharing ideas with each other beforehand and debriefing afterwards provided a valuable opportunity to reflect on the sessions and find ways to make continuous improvements. As students, the group provided us with a lot of creative freedom to try new ideas. Participants were very supportive of us on this journey and of the group itself as it evolved.

The lecturers at the University of Essex have been very encouraging of this initiative, providing us with ideas on how to extend the project. They have offered us informal supervision, helping to us to develop our reflective practice and to work through challenging situations as they arise.

The iCafe group on Zoom continues to offer opportunities for people to participate in meaningful conversation within a safe environment after a stroke. While it's still early days for us, the value of the group is evident. Some participants already appear more confident about initiating conversation, and witnessing this has felt incredibly rewarding. One participant commented, "I like the group as it enables me to exercise and enhance my speech skills after suffering two strokes."

The number of participants has increased each week. Given the group's value to participants, our plans are to continue with the sessions throughout the pandemic and beyond, while looking to expand it too. ■

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