



The Connections Café: A service-learning model for inclusive communication and community

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Background



- A service-learning project aimed at supporting individuals with **acquired communication difficulties**, such as:
 - **Aphasia** - difficulty producing and/or understanding language (written/spoken)
 - **Dysarthria** - unclear speech due to weakness or incoordination of muscles used to speak
- Conceptualised by Dr Jackie Kindell and Steph Greenwood-Davies following a call for social responsibility (SR) funding applications via the SHS SR Dragon's Den
- Developed further as part of student summer internship, focussed on volunteering and service-learning opportunities for SLT students

Context



- As many as **30,000 people** in **Greater Manchester** could have an acquired communication disability
- They face **additional barriers** in terms of **accessing community & support groups**
- Acquired communication disabilities have significant impact on **psychosocial wellbeing**¹ & **health outcomes** overall²
- BSc Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) students have **unique skills and abilities**
 - Feedback from **Student Voice** meetings
 - Many SLT programmes offer **similar initiatives**



1. Brady, et al. 2011; Zanella, et al. 2023; Medina & Weintraub, 2007

2. Cummings, 2023

Café format



- **Once a month for 2 hours** in dedicated SLT clinic space
- **Facilitated conversations and themed discussions** led by SLT students and supported by qualified professionals
- **A communication-accessible environment** with high- & low-tech communication aids
- **Hot and cold refreshments** to enhance the café experience.
- **Referral-only** basis (via SLT/healthcare services & charitable organisations)
 - Referrals exceeded availability once café commenced – most for people with post-stroke aphasia
 - 10 people with aphasia (and a family member/carer) invited to first session (1 did not attend)
 - Final session included 6 people with aphasia (with/without family member)



Aphasia Café

Group feedback

These results come from feedback forms completed by people who attended the group: five people with aphasia and four family members or carers who took part alongside them.

Each form used a picture-supported scale running from “Yes definitely” to “Not at all,” designed to be accessible for people with communication needs.

9

feedback forms

7

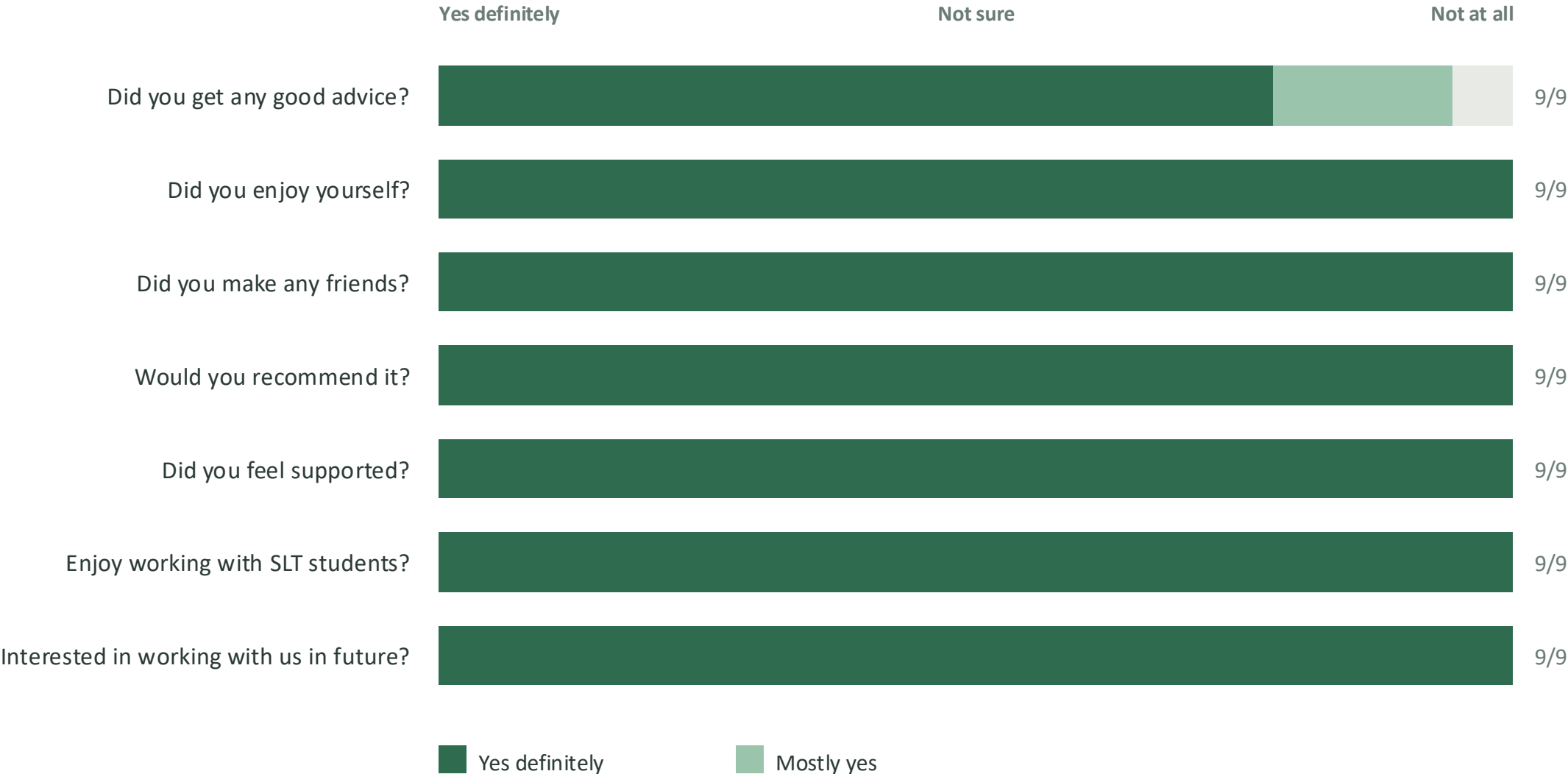
questions each

What the group thought

9 feedback forms · 5 people with aphasia, 4 family members / carers



The University of Manchester





i enjoyed it. The conversation was lovely. Communication with important and help build confidence and support recovery.

People without aphasia not realise how important conversation is. For people with aphasia communication are essential. They help us connect, build confidence and practice out communication skills.

One improvement could be a bigger room, especially wheelchair or mobility aids.

More biscuit.

We really enjoyed the connection café.

The music and sings a longs were a highlight and helped create a fun and welcoming atmosphere.

I felt like an 'aphasia family'



The Student Perspective 1

- **Seven students** involved in the project
- Goals for the experience:
 - “...**gain confidence** and comfortability **with this client group**”
 - “...gain confidence **when using communication aids**”
 - “Contribute to **meaningful change**”
- Following evaluation of the Connections Café, many students reflected on their ability to have meaningful interactions with adults with communication difficulties, using a variety of strategies



The Student Perspective 2

Overall, students developed their confidence in a range of areas:

- **AAC:** creating low tech AAC, and using a range of AAC devices to support communication
- **Seeking support:** requesting guidance when faced with challenging decisions, understanding when to ask for help
- **Respect & Sensitivity:** meeting people from diverse populations, respecting their backgrounds, beliefs and values
- **Self-management & problem-solving:** taking responsibility for our own learning, and using critical thinking to overcome challenges
- **Adaptability:** adjusting appropriately to new situations and environments



Conclusions and reflections

- Beneficial for **lecturers, students** and **community**
- **More space needed** to improve the experience for group members and to increase availability in accordance with demand
- **Model replicable** for other those with other acquired communication disabilities/aetiologies
- **Longer term aim:** to **embed** in relevant course unit, offer to **all students** and incorporate into unit's **assessment**

References

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