

Now That I Come to Think About Co-Production in Prague

Tony Osgood, April, 2024

Let me begin by outlining what co-production means as far as I understand it, particularly in relation to what we call positive behaviour support (PBS), which often isn't so very positive, is in some places a rebranding of behaviourism, and seems in other locations to serve the status quo more than people.* In co-production, the purpose of any piece of work, big or small, isn't dominated by one individual's agenda,** but is developed through partnership. In our efforts to better understand someone, it is respectful to include diverse perspectives in order to deliver dignified support that is tailored to the individual. We work in partnership together, are responsive to each other, not only in how we identify a particular goal, but how we work. I've found myself using the word *partnership* when I mean to say *co-production*, and I sometimes say *inclusion*, and *person-centredness*, and *ally*. I'm sure my language frustrates particularists, but you get my drift.

In the past when people sought to support individuals labelled with terms such as intellectual disabilities or autism, or who in some other manner were thought of as benefitting from paid support, usually the assumption was the decisions of experts dominated. (Being an expert from experience wasn't a thing not long ago.) Experts decided what was best for others. The preferences of people using services were often seen as not as important as expert opinion.

I was first introduced to the ideas that became co-production in 1987 when reading chapters by John O'Brien setting out new ways of working. (Which now are *old* ways of working, despite them coming as a complete surprise to many service managers and commissioners.) In 1996, Herb Lovett wrote of positive approaches, and the need to listen to 'othered' people.

* A useful source of further reading on these issues can be found in Herb Lovett's 1996 *Learning to Listen: positive approaches and people with difficult behaviour*, Baltimore, Paul Brookes Publishing Co – "New names and phrases always run the risk of becoming spiffy euphemisms for 'business as usual' (p.xiii) and "One author has written 'what used to be called behaviour modification is now called positive behavioural programming for challenging behaviour'. So far as I know, anyone can put a grass skirt on a cow, but it still won't hula" (Lovett, p.xv) seem relevant

** *ibid* "In the world of human services, more and more people are recognising that professionals cannot ethically dictate to those who need assistance. Instead, we are learning to listen" (Lovett, p.6). A good overview of person-centred approaches can be found here <https://thechp.syr.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/10/everyday.pdf> I find this paper useful because it warns how organisations can appear other than they are

These authors argued the best-placed people to know what people needed were the group of people themselves. They wrote services should adapt to people rather than people conform to a one-size-fits-all service. Clearly, I was missing something, because wasn't this common sense? Why didn't we do this 'listening' already? Why not be responsive to the person we supported rather than have the person meet our expectations? Shouldn't it be easier for us to adapt? Why not cut to the chase and just ask people what kind of services they'd find helpful? Well, the more obvious a thing the more invisible it becomes.

(And this is why when I did give in and write my first book, the longest chapter was called *The Elephants in the Room*. It describes things to look out for when faced by behaviour that's just a tad unusual, before making a referral or prescribing medication or reaching for a diagnosis. There are several million elephants, but some I suggested we search for include *Belonging* (does the person whose behaviour is freaking the fuck out of others have equal and loving relationships?), living in *Person-Centred Ways* (based on their preferences rather than others?), living an *Interesting Life* (meaningful for them, not some guy who turns up with an activity schedule they photocopied from a manual written in 1981 advocating for weekly horse-riding, bowling, and hydrotherapy), and is given time to *Be Themselves* (are they given *time* to hang out with people they like in places they prefer?) which is just another way of asking whether there is great rapport happening? The fifth elephant in the room I called – brace yourselves – *Communication* (not just from the person to others, but from others to the person, and crucially, from staff to staff), whilst the sixth pachyderm I named *Health* (are they well, are they in pain?). The seventh I named *Families* (I appreciate not everyone wants or has a family, but family isn't always who you were born to, but those you choose, but the point is does the person have people who are not paid to help them get a good life?). The eighth elephant is a big one, and one we often don't like to mention, which is *Competent Services* (in other words, have staff got their shit together? Sure, we can talk about Capable Environments, but I still prefer to ask '*have you got your shit together and if not what's your excuse?*') but the biggest elephant, the *mother* of all elephants, I named *Happiness*. A little happiness goes a long way, but a

little sadness will screw-up your day. And while I've diverted myself, might I also suggest we use ABC forms for happiness and laughter and good things, not just use them for problems?)

Having been punched, kicked, scratched and afterwards realised these injuries were the result often of my being a dumb arse – (enduring an injury is one thing, but I learned as a child bruises can fade despite us not being healed) – but a far worse consequence is a ruptured or fractured relationship having tried my whole life to understand what people meant as opposed to what they said, I'd long before established that 'neurotypicals' seemed a pretty rum bunch, rarely to be trusted. What is considered acceptable behaviour is a moveable feast, and what is defined as challenging is a social construction. 'Experts' determine such life-changing definitions, and managers often implement their idiocy. (How many support plans cause harm to people's lives and relationships whilst addressing specific issues, I wonder?) Wouldn't life be easier simply to discover what the person's ideas of a good life are and deliver them? Why not work together with the people we serve to describe what matters most to them?

When we hold all the cards, it is hard for people to want to play poker with us. Perhaps the reason we often struggle in human services to understand other people is we think of *their* communication as being broken, and our job as teaching them to explain themselves. Maybe we are put into the situation of being in control and making decisions, so that when we do ask people, they don't trust us enough to share their true feelings, and they comply with what they think we want. Maybe the language we use is not their language. In co-production, we share our equal perspectives.

From reading all this interesting stuff it was clear that what we at the time called challenging behaviour might actually be just complaining, or a kind of physical emphasis of an emotional frustration, or evidence we did not know how to teach people, or because we'd misunderstand or hadn't listened otherwise. Such behaviour might even be normal, a symptom of something bigger. Such as not being included or consulted. Which is why when I read Geraint Ephraim* mention *exotic communication*

* Ephraim, G. (1998), Exotic communication, conversations, and scripts - or tales of the pained, the unheard and the unloved, in D.Hewitt (Ed.) *Challenging Behaviour: Principles & Practice*, London, David Fulton Publishers

rather than challenging behaviour plenty of us were all over it. Ephraim's terminology was a product of his listening to the behaviour of others and reframing his words and thinking.

We taught *them* what *we* thought was best. To make the bed. To fit. To often not be themselves. To be ashamed. To hide their uniqueness and their differences. We were so busy worrying about what they were not we forgot to share in who they were. We taught them to say or sign or give us a symbol for *please*, or *thank you*, rarely *more*, but often we taught them to begin every communication exchange with the word *sorry*. *Sorry?* Listening to my brother Martin, his view, as someone who had endured special education that wasn't particularly special and barely education, was that the most useful thing the system could teach a child or adult labelled as 'disabled' to say was *fuck off*. And if that was considered too offensive by people who used *fuck off* freely themselves, then teaching *no* would be an immensely helpful thing – having the right to be *asked* and having his decisions respected would have saved Martin a world of pain. Shoe laces? His brain was not designed to make that easy, those fingers had ideas of their own, but let's try slip-ons and see if life is easier. In the UK in the seventies and eighties experts didn't often listen to families whose communication was often in the same code experts used; asking children like Martin was frankly unimaginable. So hundreds of thousands of children like Martin learned to speak to themselves and each other, because at least then things made sense. Our barriers were their burdens. Our thinking remains their obstacle.

People sometimes say working with people who are profoundly 'disabled' makes co-production impossible because of the lack of language, or capacity. It is helpful to remember the advice of Mark Gold or Dave Hingsburger, but then, not all of us have been exposed to their ideas, and not everyone was taught by Hingsburger's professor, Geoff Hett,* who once advised Dave, after *he* made a joke about teaching a student with profound developmental disabilities to compute $28 \times 30 + 6$, to try another way. (Another way of *thinking* about the student.) Prof Hett wrote in Dave's assignment

* Hingsburger, D. (1998), *Do? Be? Do? What to teach and how to teach people with developmental disabilities*, Toronto, Diverse City Press

feedback: 'An adequate teacher knows what goals to set for their students. A good teacher never ever suggests that there is something unteachable because that assumes an incompetence in the learner rather than an inadequacy in the teacher. An excellent teacher would never joke about the struggles others have in learning. I think you should strive for excellence.'

In answer to concerns that people cannot contribute to our understanding of what they need – that some people don't *qualify* for co-production – I often quote a little passage from John O'Brien: 'Some people's ways of communicating leave the important people in their lives unable to hear their views about a life that would make sense. These other people have little choice but to create a story with a valued and central role for the person, whose preferences remain ambiguous. Then, these people make adjustments based on the person's responses.'*

In this article, I want to reflect on the wider implications of co-production for ourselves, that it is about not only people in services, but for us.

Working in Prague, events conspired to teach me a thing. (Spoiler alert: co-production teaches us many things.) Though my visit coincided with the launch of a Czech translation of my first book (I smuggled into my thanks a Meryl Streep quote), the primary purpose was to deliver a couple of university lectures and a series of masterclasses. According to Viktor Frankl, doing work, meeting people, experiencing pleasant and less pleasant things, offer opportunities to choose to make meaning. Like all good lessons, the three little stories here are neither wholly good nor completely terrible, though they all reminded me of that immensely useful Greek word *harmolipi*: sadness and happiness co-existing. They show I'm often a screw-up.

A lot of people put a great deal of work into the making of one book, and every time it is translated, a whole crowd of other people work even harder to have it locally make sense. The Czech organisation 'grand-parenting' the book is one created by families of 'othered' children, that advocates for changes in how their children are seen and how best to organise the sort of support people actually need to grow and be.**

* O'Brien, J., (2002) The Ethics of Person Centred Planning. In S.Holburn & P.Vietze *Person Centred Planning: research, practice and future directions*, p.399-414 (this quote, p.412), Baltimore: Brookes

** *Děti úplňku*. They advocate and agitate and work to highlight best practice. Brian McDonald, of Behaviour Support Solutions, Ireland, has for many years supported their work. He's the best cheerleader imaginable, and I'm honoured to resemble him just a little bit, even if its only on a dark and stormy night when visibility is poor and I'm wearing Czech beer goggles

One of the masterclasses I taught was called *Co-Production* and this was attended by social workers, parents, support staff, and senior professionals. They worked in communities, education and institutions. Now, an interesting thing happened on the way to the end of this workshop. These things always begin innocuously. Beginning as usual by mentioning that in England it is ok to question speakers as we go, answer questions during the workshop was fine. Whilst this was a workshop, we'd also like to embody co-production principles by having participants, oh, you know, *participate*.

I introduced the concept of social validity, which in PBS is supposed to relate to creating the space and ways of working in which co-production can become ordinary, rather than PBS focussing on clinical validity, and doing what is easiest for staff to measure. As serendipity is wont to do, chance provided a great example right in front of me. One of the attendees had decided the chairs were uncomfortable – they *were* uncomfortable no matter the colourful Maslow cushions* – and the chair did not suit her at that time. She had sensibly chosen to sit on the floor. (I admired her – she was clearly her own person and able to meet her own needs.) We spoke about how funny it was that thirty people in a room were all sitting on uncomfortable chairs, and then there's this one person sitting on a comfortable cushion on the floor, stretching out her legs, looking smug. Now this is a metaphor if ever there was. If our job includes understanding and ameliorating behaviours that challenge, we might find ourselves seduced by our own importance, status and knowledge. We're a precious resource, right? Our job titles feature Capital Letters, we might even boast letters after our name.** In such a position it might be terribly easy for people around this woman – the vast majority, seat sitters – to be considered socially *more* acceptable, more 'normal'. Her floor sitting might be labelled weird. Labelling something as abnormal reaffirms *our* normality. The woman doesn't fit! We might think it would *help* her inclusion to sit

* Brian McDonald can tell you the colour of self-actualisation. (This is an inside joke only participants of Brian's workshops will get)

** Even *before* our names! Wouldn't it be great to use letters that signified our *kindness* or acted as a warning? DR (Drones Repeatedly)? EBE (Expert By Experience)? How about my favourite – NACA? (Not a Certified Arsehole)

on a chair. Now sure, there are some assumptions here. But confirmation bias hasn't stopped humans moving out from the savanna and into agrarian cultures and finally toward a world-ending dystopia of our own creation, any more than the Dunning-Kruger effect has stopped dangerous people becoming presidents or ministers, right? Surely she *wants* to sit on a chair like normal people. We're doing her a *favour*. Think of the benefits of increasing her repertoire. Maybe she'll *thank* us for reinforcing her in-seat behaviour.

And it just so happens there are a host of clinically valid chair-sitting behaviour programmes we could begin to use, and we don't even have to use punishment – that old human addiction – or restrictions, or any aversive approach; why, we can just use positive yet still coercive reinforcement because we're the good guys! (A warning: "Positive approaches are not about cheerfully reinforcing people to do what we expect them to do but about listening to their preferences and good reasons for what they are doing, no matter how difficult what they are doing might be," Lovett, 1996, p.xiv.) This was an example of people justifying *their* choosing of a programme goal. The woman on the cushion on the floor seemed interested in my proposal, even quizzical, because clearly no idiot from England was going to stop *her* from sitting on her cushion or deny her *her* choice, but she'd like to see me try.* We could justify our work by claiming to have her best interests at heart, even if in reality part of our enthusiasm was actually from trying to show our experimental control and power and technical expertise (to ourselves, to others, to our colleagues – to increase *our* status) by making her sit in a chair like normal people.

But just wait a minute. In PBS one of the things we often find useful is to wonder loudly whether the issue we've been asked to address is a real issue for the person. Just because we aren't *able* to or don't *want* to challenge the boring norm by sitting on a cushion on the floor doesn't mean we should insist everyone sits on a chair. Just because a referral has been made to deal with floor-sitting, doesn't mean it's actually a problem for her. Does it really impact people, this flagrant floor sitting? Does it matter

* At this point I remembered what a bigwig BCBA (a certified behaviour analyst) told me years ago when we were chatting about consent, that she was grateful it didn't apply to kids because she'd never get *her* work done

to *her*? Sure, most of the Western world and Northern Hemisphere seems to prefer chairs, but the Western world and the Northern Hemisphere aren't the world entire; let's see things in the round. Were not-so-subtle cultural biases at work in our decisions? What if *she's* not broken? If her behaviour works for her? What if our attitude about floor sitting says more about us than her? What if we try to understand the message of her sitting on a cushion on the floor? What if we together create a shared understanding? As Eric Emerson wrote long ago maybe we should do what the referrer asks, and maybe we should ask *why* the referrer is asking us to do this thing.

(What applies to floor sitting might also apply to self-harm, swearing, rocking, humming the Polish national anthem under your breath whilst dancing the tarantella during editorial meetings, and pretty much any other behaviour you care to think about, including thinking about thinking. The question for us to ask is: from whom is this behaviour a problem? Us or them? Is their coping mechanism really a problem?)

Because in PBS, the goal of our work is actually not about us, but rather about the person's quality of life (and happiness), and about supporting the people around the person to reframe what they think and what they do to better support the individual. Taking co-production seriously and embedding it in what we do simply means inviting the person to shape the goals, shape how we work, and whether we're needed in the first place. Do we give them a chance to say *no*? I think those of us used to direct support get this better than those who have not experienced being a support worker.

What if, I asked in mock surprise, the woman is happy sitting on the floor? She *chose* to sit on the floor, after all. Sitting on the floor is not illegal. Maybe there's even a *reason* she prefers the floor? Maybe if we discovered more of her story, and why the floor rather than the chair mattered, perhaps we might suggest there are more important things to worry about. Maybe *we* might learn to appreciate floors? So in PBS, we might ask if sitting on a cushion on the floor as big a deal for the woman as it is for us.

As the translators, Misha and Hanka, performed their magic, I watched people recognise the kind of fun day they could expect. Participants spoke amongst themselves, and people asked questions of one another. We discussed how those of us cursed by a technological comprehension of human behaviour might think of arranging

a good life for someone as a kind of general non-contingent abolishing operation (if that's not a contradiction in terms). If challenging behaviour is functional – it achieves something – that that something is what's lacking in the environment, so just deliver it *before* the challenging behaviour. I was a little pleased with the elegance of this.

Hubris is a dangerous thing, pride comes before a fall. The universe giveth, and the universe taketh away. Only in this case, it was the deterministic universe in the shape of a behaviourist that taketh away. He stole my thunder with the same ease he denied the validity of my opinion. I'm thankful to him, though he is possibly not thankful to me, though maybe, who knows?

And so it was that this gentleman began to ask a long, long question, tacked on the end of a statement. It felt performative – as if his monologue wasn't really addressed to me, and was aimed instead at other people in the room. He was an applied behaviour analysis (ABA) tutor and a father, the translator explained. His point was about his independence and choice-making as a therapist. (Not anyone else's choice.) To conclude, he said it was not for the 'subject' to choose the teaching goal. 'I decide,' he said. 'I choose how to teach. I choose *what* to teach. I decide if someone has learned.' Children and adults were learners and subjects not partners. He plugged *them* into *his* clinically valid programmes. (Maybe he did not trust others to make good-enough decisions.) He kept interrupting and posing problem scenarios throughout the morning.* The morning felt like running the hurdles.

Maybe something was lost in translation. In the same way there are natural differences of emphasise amongst PBS practitioners, self-advocates, and health-food merchants, there are measurable graduations of "ABAers" (not my word) – with some being more literal in following the early principles of the science (in this man's case, this meant no need for functional assessment, no need for asking, for consent, no need for understanding the message beneath the behaviour: you teach what *you* want). He knew a great many techniques, but knew as little about the involvement of behaviour analysts in the origins and development of PBS as he did the conceptual and theoretical

* Old joke: when you're out of ammunition, to fool the enemy and feel brave, keep firing

paradigms and weaknesses of the application of that science. Any alternative interpretation seemed to undermine his identity and all he'd been doing for years. Most of the BCBAs I know would be just as horrified about what the man was suggesting. But if there is nothing inherent in impairment to make it a disability, then there is nothing inherent in ABA to make practitioners arseholes.

What was interesting was the frustration shown by other participants to his comments, and by his continual attempt to dominate the narrative. He reinforced every prejudice against stereotypes of ABA practitioners (and more worrying, the dismissing the useful practices they know about that might help people get a good life). It is not uncommon to hear doubts about ABA (as a science, as a paradigm) in autistic communities, and maybe his attitudinal assumptions – his *right* to speak over other people, his view of the teacher being the font of all knowledge – demonstrated why; but he had helpfully shown why co-production (or inclusion or partnership) is important, not only for people using services, but for us all, because listening to people and working to support their goals and preferences is an ethical safeguard to our own self-preoccupation with being the loudest voice in any room.

In conversation during my time in Czechia, some people objected to the word 'autistic' because it was considered insulting. In the US, UK and in many other places – such as in my family – the autistic people I know and love and listen to are very keen to identify as 'autistic'. But apparently it was not for them to decide how they wished to be described – it was for experts. Different countries and communities prefer various terms, and it makes sense to respect these, but there are implications if we use a term such as disorder – it suggests the issue is in the person, not how they are understood. It's a vestige of the medical model. I struggled to fit in by using the word *disorder*. For many people, autistic is their identity. To deny them a term because we feel offended on their behalf still means we are trying to dominate what people call themselves. Many years ago a young woman I knew once described herself during a review as – brace positions – 'spastic', and promptly the professionals felt sickened. As a conversation about the rights and wrongs of this continued, I struggled with how to feel about her chosen term. But it was hers, not mine, and in the end I tried to respect her choice, because most people like to have their choices comprehended. One issue is

that one person represents not only themselves but at times group, at least in the mind of others. Think how easy it is for a single abusive man is seen as representing all men.

‘OK,’ the tutor said, ‘if PBS is so smart – and remember, I don’t *want* to make this about ABA being *better* than PBS – ’ (but he did; he *was* making it about just that) ‘then what do you do about aggression, eh?’ Arms folded, head tilted back, chin forward, a real pettifogger.

‘The same thing we do about any behaviour. Discover why the person has no option but to be aggressive – its usually about us not listening before – then find a non-aggressive way to achieve the same. So first – what’s the *message* behind aggression?’

Mr Pettifogger reminded me that an institution isn’t always a place, rather a way of thinking. And if, as Herb Lovett notes, “...we now know institutions intensify disabilities rather than remove them” (p.3), then thinking institutionally – clinging to our fixed schemata – doesn’t help our ability to be responsive to people who need our help rather than our condemnations.

And I notice that throughout my time in Prague a lingering thought dogged my steps – what would Herb Lovett say? Well, despite not having Herb around to ask, we at least have his words. That must suffice, though it is hardly the same. He wrote, “I have consulted, from time to time, in large institutions where all kinds of liberties have been lost to those who live in them. It really takes no particular courage or perspicacity to see how wrong and unnecessary these places are, but it has been difficult to express this view without diminishing the intentions of the people who work in them. The large majority of people in these places mean well and do the best they can, but their power to act is usually severely limited. As Ingmar Bergman wrote, “In hierarchies, all doors are closed”” (p.xv).

The more we hold on to our status and knowledge, our roles, the harder it is to listen to others. When *we’re* the elephant in the room, that realisation can crush us. After the umpteenth statement, we spoke about what message his behaviour seemed to send me – coming to a workshop on *Co-Production* only to speak of ABA and belittle other people’s choices seemed odd – and that maybe he’d come to the wrong event, but maybe he could stay and listen, or maybe enjoy the free lunch then leave, or save his questions for the end of the day, but it was his choice. What did he think?

He nodded and kept his counsel until early in the afternoon, when he returned to the morning's topic; the problem staff faced in facilities was exactly this kind of choice making; it made the job of staff impossible. ("We have established services for what people are not, rather than for who they are," Lovett, p.4.)

I suggested the word *facility* didn't make it onto the Ark with Noah – it drowned in the flood, because we should maybe think in terms of creating places that meet human not staff needs – and maybe using the word *facility* was just a way of not acknowledging the idea that the place most people want is better described as HOME. (Home has is a capital *everything*.) Humans can't live in facilities, even if they exist there. They live in communities and places they belong. Why, there's nothing more foolish than sending a child or adolescent away to a facility where some professional will assess their behaviour when said behaviour is primarily happening at home where different contingencies operate. Doing that is just bad science. Functions are often environmentally determined. Exchange *HOME* for *facility* and you can easily see different functions and might arrive at completely the *wrong* solution for HOME. An way to support someone might work in a *facility* but isn't practical for HOME. (Hence the birth of PBS!) Any *facility* not respecting choice isn't fit for purpose.

The *Ark*, I repeated, while the ghost of Herb Lovett cited himself: "The problem is not behaviourism, but the way practitioners have chosen to apply it, nor is the problem service systems and service providers. After all – and before all – some people really need help to live. The problem lies in how we have chosen to view the people who need help and how we have acted on our subsequent good intentions. Our most pressing problem is that we have not listened carefully to those we would serve" (1996, p.5).

A women spoke to me after the workshop and shared the story of teaching her autistic son more useful communication skills, and how it has taken a long time – every success is fragile, but even fragility should be celebrated – because she did not wish to rupture trust and rapport for the sake of speed. (If someone's well-being is dependent on a task being successfully completed, what happens to their sense of self if the next task is unsuccessful? Do they suddenly feel themselves to be worthless?) Mr Pettifogger had years before urged her to adopt reinforcing and punishing techniques in order to 'achieve results'. But for her family the result to be achieved was a human relationship rather than a set of skills. She took her son's responses to her teaching

efforts as communicating his preferences, and she did not often use contrived reinforcement – tokens, prizes, things – but chose natural consequences such as her responding to his nascent communications. They shaped one another, and learned together what each preferred. They may have used techniques I'd recognise as coming from ABA, but the methodology was co-produced, as was the goal.

(The pay-off for my learning to make a passable cup of coffee is coffee, not someone praising by saying enthusiastically, "Good coffee making, Tony!" Use praise too often, or let someone I don't like praise me, and praise will soon become a punisher. It bothers me that we think too much about 'reinforcers' rather than who and how we deliver them; shouldn't we have access to the goodies, regardless? Will you ration my choice? Ration my air next? Maybe it is not the token I'm after, but my avoiding your scowl?)

Communication is key to many human interactions, and indeed, a sense of belonging, but communication is more than a formal language, it is gesture, tone, body language, facial expression. And now her son's communication is better understood – as is his behaviour – and he is loved for who he is. He has learned from his family and teachers, and they have learned from him.

Mr P has stayed with me, and the exchange really made me think about how hard co-production can be, but he reminds me how important it remains, and how if more people read Herb Lovett maybe their work might be a great deal easier and less damaging.

During an earlier workshop about practice leadership, I showed a publicly available video of Professor Christine Bigby demonstrating active support alongside two people with profound disabilities. The participants that day were asked to watch the video and make a note of the different types of support they saw, how Christine organised activities, and how she and those she was working with communicated their choices and preferences. The video has often been useful and triggering a conversation and I have a long list prepared of the smart things she and the people she works alongside do. But there is no straight road in this world, and the best plans of people writing masterclasses often don't survive real life. At the end of the video, I asked for someone to volunteer to say what they'd seen – I was intending to finish this exercise with the principle that if a professor can turn up and do a proper day's work, we can all

do the same, and that practice leaders show us the way, show us this is what is expected, and create a constructive culture by doing not yelling.

But the man whose hand shot into the air to volunteer had other ideas. Let's call him a child psychiatrist at a big hospital. (Because he is.) The man said he saw no communication whatsoever because the 'patients' (as he called them), and the 'worker' – I had at that point not introduced Christine or explained her work or status – just manipulated the hands of people to mimic involvement. I was a little taken aback. We spoke about definitions of formal communication – a shared, intentional code – compared to pre-intentional or non-intentional behaviour that we can shape to acquire meaning. So what do we do, a) ignore people until they can use a formal code, or b) interpret what we see as potentially communicative and treat it as close enough for now? Yes, this is interpretive, but by gauging how the the individual responds to our interpretation, we can modify our responses. We change what we do. This was a kind of co-production, and if a staff team saw a leader do this, they might also see the benefits of doing so themselves, because evidence suggests many workers don't actually listen to people they support, but do pay attention 'to leaders'.

Now sure he had a thing or five to say to challenge this – the formal definition of communication, he used, his understanding of support, all evidenced in the literature – but by actively listening to his tone of voice, his posture, by the kind of words he used, it was clear he was speaking academically, as if he was speaking to others to ensure they recognised his expertise or status. We were able to provide alternative examples to each of his concerns. But maybe by seeing he was heard, by being presented with alternatives, he at at least listened in return. Later someone organising the masterclasses spoke with people the man works with, and while he acknowledges that the hospital is quite 'grim', he wants to bring about changes to how children are supported and taught, and admitted his response was academic and overly professional, and not so much human. I suspect – though I don't know this – that he might not often enjoy the benefits of working directly with many of the children his hospital houses, and that if he could find a way to spend time with real children and real people, as Jim Mansell used to do, as Christine Bigby does, then his firm belief in the dominance of formal definitions of communication and what good support looks like might soften a little when encountering real life.

It struck me that if co-production does anything, it allows space to honestly challenge one another, and to learn to adjust. I remember the hash I made of my first attempt to facilitate person-centred planning, and how because of my professional identity and the expectations of those around me, I made the plan more about my agenda than the person. That shame has lived with me and taught me to turn up, shut up, and listen. Likewise I cringe at my early attempts to write a support plan *on* someone, not *with* someone. I have been lucky to have known good practice leaders who showed me what co-production looked like in action, and their teaching has been as invaluable as the lessons given me by people using services.

Finally, it must be said that lecturing to an audience for whom English is a strange, illogical language is always fun, challenging, and a valuable experience. It teaches me to communicate more using less. Translating is particularly weird, and my book's Czech translator, Petra Mertinova, had a hell of a job. But compared to a live event, a book is easy. I learned this at my first university lecture. I tend to wander as I speak, go off script, and sometimes reply to questions with long stories. I don't often simply read a slide – this is hard for a translator who is used to lecturers doing just that. The English idioms I use, the vernacular, often have no local equivalence – 'the elephant in the room' is a good example. At my first talk in Prague, everything that could technically go wrong did so. We got the finish time wrong. (An extra half-an-hour? No problem!) The computer did not meaningfully communicate to the projector despite sharing the same code. Too many turned up and people were obliged to sit on stairs. My belt decided to give up the fight against my living-a-good-life waist meaning photos show a bearded bald hippy whose jeans are two sizes too big – they were. I had a heavy head cold and coughed. I asked for a white coffee, no sugar, and was given a black coffee with sugar. The room grew hotter and hotter. And the new translator – an assistant professor teaching inclusive education at a different university – was horrified to discover I was proposing to spend two and a half hours improvising without the safety net of the slides she'd read. 'As a lecturer you know we sometimes have to improvise?' I said, making many, many assumptions. Her disbelieving look spoke volumes. Her job was harder than mine.

We began well, and she even agreed to translate my gestures, which was a bit of an open invitation. But as I got into my stride, it transpired my stride was not hers, and

she asked often for clarification. I slowed and shortened my sentences, but I think the damage to her confidence had been done. And I felt awful. What didn't help was that many in the lecture theatre spoke better English than I, and many laughed *before* the translator conveyed the jokes into Czech. Some frowned when the translator spoke. Some called out amendments. A couple of people who helped organise the lecture helped out with some tricky specialist terms, but I think the translator couldn't wait to escape after less than an hour. We had always planned on a second translator taking over toward the end, simply because even on a good day translating is incredibly taxing. Then a young man stood up from his seat and came toward me.

He spoke to the translator who was by this time exhausted, and the next thing I knew a stranger without apparent experience of social or health care was translating. We became a double-act and had a great rapport. He didn't know the topic, but he knew how to translate. He knew humans. He was an attorney. He knew about supporting people. By the end of the lecture the original translator had scooted off to catch her train, and I never had a chance to thank her or apologise if my stride was too uneven for her to follow. Despite altering my cadences and style, the initial changes – the loss of the slides, the longer lecture – seemed enough to make her job near impossible. This made me think of co-production and Herb Lovett, that maybe co-production, inclusion, partnership and person-centredness is not something we do when we're working, but part of who we are.

So here I am back in England, back to a privileged semi-retirement. Not only is Herb Lovett still hanging about reminding me I could have handled things better if I'd only got off my high horse and maybe remembered what he wrote about, reminding me that faces and relationships keep us human and are what matter most, but Mr Pettifogger is here, too, sniffing on my other shoulder, whispering seductively about numbers, data, processes, and the two of them have been joined by a psychiatrist who was able to in effect say, 'Fair enough,' in response to my answers – who showed a great deal of listening – and the translator of the first lecture is here, suggesting in hindsight what we might have done more to make the evening go well for her. When I landed in England and walked through Nothing to Declare, maybe I lied; maybe I should have admitted to smuggling home some lessons remembered – to work with people more authentically. Mr Pettifogger taught me the dangers of being an ideologue – and that

challenging some of his ideas says more about my need to demonstrate my truth than acknowledge his keenly-held position that was just as much about his identity as a dad trying to do what he had been taught was best for his child. The psychiatrist taught me it is often not that people are born with rigid definitions but are obliged by their role and status to speak rigidly, and if we begin a conversation, we can together arrive at a more healthy understanding of one another. The translator taught me that in a crisis I might still enjoy improvising, but not everyone feels the same way, and if I'd been more attentive, I might have worked differently; it took a stranger to get us out of a pickle. Isn't *that* what co-production is about – recruiting diverse perspectives to deal with big questions? The translator struggling to translate my improvisation showed me no matter how clever I think I am, maybe I need to listen more and step aside from being who others expect me to be. If I had been genuinely co-productive, I would have got a lot more out of lectures by being more open to others.

So for the last time let me quote Herb Lovett, who though dead, accompanied me during Prague lectures and evenings. “All technologies of control necessarily support a hierarchical vision of society – of a leader who knows better than the led. The radical potential of a real community movement comes from the fact that no one can be wiser for a group than the group itself; no one can be better informed about individual wishes and needs than the individual themselves” (Lovett, 1996, p.5).

Co-production, no matter the name we give to the way of working and thinking, suggests included people are best placed to know what works best for them.

This is what Prague reminded me: that co-production isn't something we do at work, but a more profound way of seeing the world. Co-production requires us to make time to reflect on what works and what gets in the way, and what we need to change about ourselves. Co-production is not performative – done for appearances – but just a way of working with people as equals, a way of realising everyone has something to teach us. Prague reminded me that all the time we're obliged by our roles into wondering what it is we can bring to other peoples' parties, we often fail to think about what unhelpful attitudes we should leave on the doorstep.

So thank you Mr Pettifogger: I don't agree with you, but I appreciate how important and seductive science is for you. (It is easy to suffer for what you believe in, but easier still to make others suffer for your beliefs.) Mr Psychiatrist – I wish you

every success in changing the places at risk of dehumanising children by challenging the academic understanding of communication with one that's more fit for humans. And to the translator, apologies for everything that went awry, but maybe there are things we can learn for next time; we know what *not* to do, and that's a big help. My biggest thanks go to the woman who was comfortable being herself, there on the cushion on the floor, without whom I might have stuck rigidly to *my* script rather than seize the opportunity serendipity usually provides, that in this case, despite being too old to sit on the floor myself, it works for others.

Herb Lovett came to realise how enriching it is to each of us when working with people in partnership to co-produce whatever the hell it is they want – usually, a life they enjoy. Rather than telling people what to do because of Herb's psychological qualifications, he practiced as a partner because of his humane appreciation of the lives lived by people in often intolerable situations. We're with the people we support for only a little while, so we should make ourselves useful. Often that doesn't mean telling the person how to behave, but helping people around the person to think about how they work. And sometimes, maybe too rarely, we are able to go along with people on the ride of all our lives, for the entirety of our time on this planet. That can be exhausting and exhilarating, so working in-step is a great way to enjoy the journey. We have so much to learn from spending time with other people, in taking them seriously regardless of who society says they are, what they should be, how they should behave. If we are lucky and work hard at remaining human in often inhumane human services, rather than succumbing to the obvious attractions of robotic ideologies and ways of working, the people for whom we work and who at the end of the day pay our salaries might even begin to share with us a glimpse of the world they experience.

That is a priceless gift, and one co-production offers.

I may not have known Dave Hingsburger's professor, but I met Dave a few times, and on one occasion after class he asked me, "Tony, how many people with intellectual disabilities have you met?" I blathered on about having years of experience and meeting thousands of people from working here and there, and he interrupted me kindly, and repeated his question. I told Dave I knew hundreds of people, in response to which he spoke more softly, and more slowly, as if speaking to a frightened child, and he said, "Tony. How many people with disabilities have you *met*?" and I thought, *gosh*,

this isn't a question about me, but what I think my job is, and I said to Dave, 'Oh, dozens and dozens,' and Dave being Dave – and how I miss Dave – said even more gently, opening his hands, 'Tony, how many of the people you work with do you *know*?' And frankly I wanted to cry, because unless we make the time, the people we work with become people we don't know; we have to make the time to meet the person rather than the issue, and we need to be reminded constantly to listen. 'Less than a dozen,' I confessed, feeling small, and insignificant, and unworthy. Dave (being Dave) grinned and said, 'That's great. Better than none!'

He then suggested the next day I was at work I try to met another person. Just one. Really meet them, try to form rapport, trust, get in touch with them, and keep my promise to work with them not on them, to advocate for a good life, not just resolve a behaviour issue. A behaviour issue is just a complaint and a cry and a communication.

And then the following week, Dave suggested, maybe try for one more human.

Dave helped me understand co-production by showing me co-production. He allowed for my processing lag.

You have to do it in order to understand why it is so important.

Tony recently retired from working as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Kent's Tizard Centre, in Canterbury. There he spent almost two decades doing less teaching than he wanted, consulting on challenging behaviour more than was strictly necessary, and spending too little time being asked about person-centred approaches. He enjoyed spending huge dollops of time showing people proper positive behaviour support, several moments talking about what's wrong about how we apply applied behaviour analysis, and a fair bit of time chatting about autistic life, and though he enjoyed *most* of his work, he did not overly adore experiencing inept organisations, self-preoccupied people, and commissioners undergoing implementation psychoses. He worked in an NHS challenging needs services, managed services and was a family carer. He has written numerous chapters, articles, and books, including co-editing Baker, P., & Osgood, T. (2019) *Understanding and Responding to Behaviour that Challenges in Intellectual Disabilities: A Handbook for Those Who Provide Support* (Second Edition), Brighton, Pavilion; Osgood, T. (2020) *Supporting Positive Behaviour in Intellectual Disabilities and Autism: Practical Strategies for Addressing Challenging Behaviour*, London, Jessica Kingsley; and Osgood, T. (2022) *Practice Leadership in Challenging Behaviour Services for Autism and Intellectual Disabilities: Practical Strategies for Supporting People*, London, Jessica Kingsley

He now writes, consults, mentors and coaches. But mainly, he does the shopping and cooking and potters about the house complaining about all the laundry he has agreed to do. You can read his articles about behaviour and person-centred support on his website: <http://tonyosgood.com/home/writing/>