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Christoph Falschlunger, Vienna 2020

‘The room in-between’

Interaction in Rhythmics and aspects of the approach in the artistic-educational work with pupils having severe intellectual disabilities

Introduction

Interaction is an important part of life. In Rhythmics¹, music education and music therapy contexts, where interaction is created by music, movement and various materials, this process opens up space in-between, where nonverbal communication and creative expression can take place. This article stresses that communication is more than just interacting through voice (verbal interaction). It emphasizes its possibilities and its value for artistic-educational work and shows how interactions can be initiated and continued through music, movement and materials by creating space for expression and communication on a variety of levels, which allows each participant to give and receive and dwell in possibility.

In educational settings with people with severe intellectual disabilities according to Schuppener (2007, 123f) *communication* and *interaction* are important to stimulate, because these are two aspects to foster social competences. In remedial literature (e.g. Speck 2005, Fröhlich 2006, Fröhlich 2008) as well as in current literature on inclusion the phrase *strengthening social competences* has always been an important one, especially when it comes to discussing possibilities in terms of participation for people with disabilities. Rhythmics as one special approach may support this. That is why for decades a lot of Rhythmics teachers use and write about this aspect in their specialist literature².

¹ *Rhythmics* is based on the German written term *Rhythmik*. Even if *Eurhythmics* or *Dalcroze Eurhythmics* (referring to Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, the founder of *Rhythmic gymnastics* in the early 20th century) would be the original translations into English I prefer to use *Rhythmics* to distinguish from Rudolf Steiner's *Eurythmie* and to emphasize the changeability and progression of *Rhythmics* as an approach, method, principle, etc. In Austria we now (2016) want to establish the differentiated term *RhythmikMB* (= Rhythmik/Musik und Bewegung; in English: Rhythmics/music and movement) to stress *Rhythmics* as an artistic-educational method or approach (seen as a process) dealing inter alia with the means music and movement in a creative use and to distinguish from *Rhythmik* as an expression for a variety of things.

² e.g.: forming of social skills (Neikes 1969/1998), solidarity (Hoellering 1974), interaction (Schaefer 1992), social learning (Klöppel/Vliex 1992, Stummer 2006, Witoszynskyj/Schindler/Schneider 2006), social experience (Stabe 1996), relationship (Bühler/Thaler 2001), social interaction (Danuser-Zogg 2002), dialog (Köck-Hatzmann 2006), social-emotional acting (Garnitschnig/Neira Zugasti 2006), verbal and nonverbal communication (Bankl/Mayr/Witoszynskyj 2009) - focused on German written Rhythmics literature (Austria, Germany, Switzerland)

The value of communication and interaction: the 'room in-between'

When two people meet they may get in contact with each other. Somehow a communication starts, even the two persons do not speak to each other. Watzlawick would say: *"It is not possible to not communicate!"* (2007, 50, translated by Falschlunger) If one of the persons re-acts on the information he or she receives, an inter-action may start. The inter-action develops, when action and re-action get into a fluent process, which both of the persons may influence and stop. In the meaning of Watzlawick (2007, 50f) *communication* is just one sending statement, which can be either word, mime, gesture, pause, etc., whereas *interaction* means the reciprocal process in acting and re-acting.

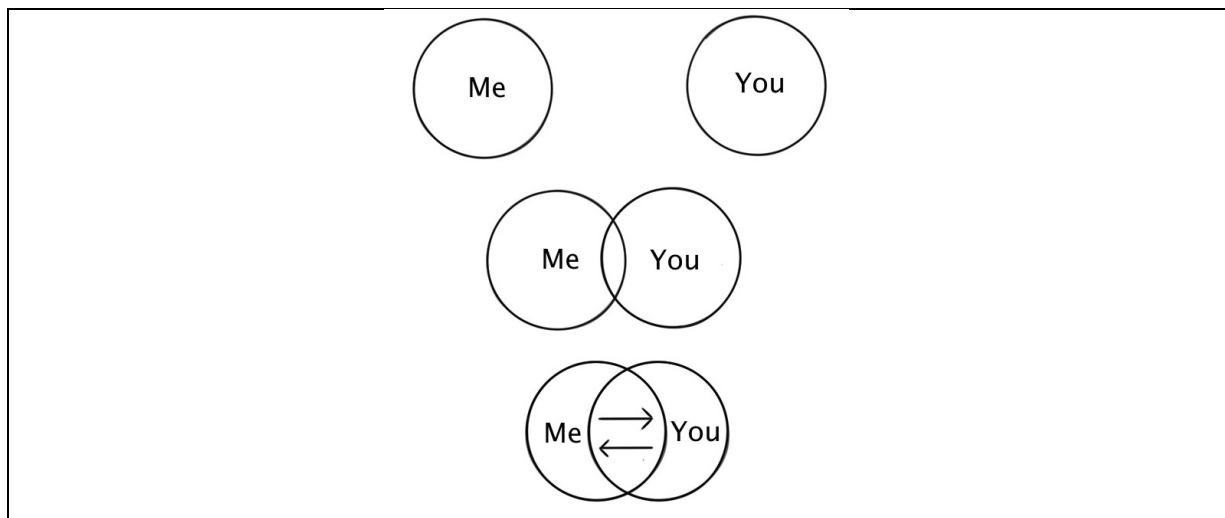


Fig. 1: Interaction: the 'room in-between' (Falschlunger 2015)

With the view of a Rhythmics teacher interaction seems to be a bi-polar process, because two poles get into a special 'relationship' – they somehow complement. This 'electric field' of interactions can be used in a positive way in the pedagogical work in Rhythmics classes, as well as in other settings. Even if the ability to communicate is limited, for example by disabilities, then Rhythmics is able to offer supporting possibilities for interaction because it focuses on the personal expression of each person – not the deficiencies, but the competences are the base to deal with.

Interaction with people with severe intellectual disabilities and its holistic aspects

According to Biermann (2000, 94) severe intellectual disabilities means an occurrence of more than one disability, an impairment of the entire person (in most of his or her possibilities in expression) and difficulties even in elementary encounters with other persons. The interactive process is disabled for example through a different quality of visual contact, a limited preparedness for interacting, less vocalism, delayed social smiling, passivity or apathy or/and emotional reactions, that are difficult to interpret or even to see (according to Lanners 2009, 131). All these are difficulties that reduce the chance to get in interaction with other persons. The consequences are less social contacts, less communication and less interaction, which means less possibility for development.

Especially when there are less possibilities for a person to communicate and interact, the pedagogic way is to focus on the resources and competences of each participant, because

everyone has its own expression, the way to communicate and to get in contact. These base contacts – apart from speaking – are possible through *perception*, through *movement* and through (the ability for) *relationship* (according to Bühler/ Thaler 2001, 22f). Fröhlich (2008) illustrates it like this: communication and interaction have to be seen as holistic processes, because they are influenced by *movement*, *experiences with body*, *emotion*, *memory* and *cognitive processes*, *perception* and *social experiences*. Garnitschnig/ Neira Zugasti (2006) would complete by two supplementary functions: *will* and *creativity*. That means, that interaction as a process through acting and reacting has an effect on the entire person and all of his or her personal actions.

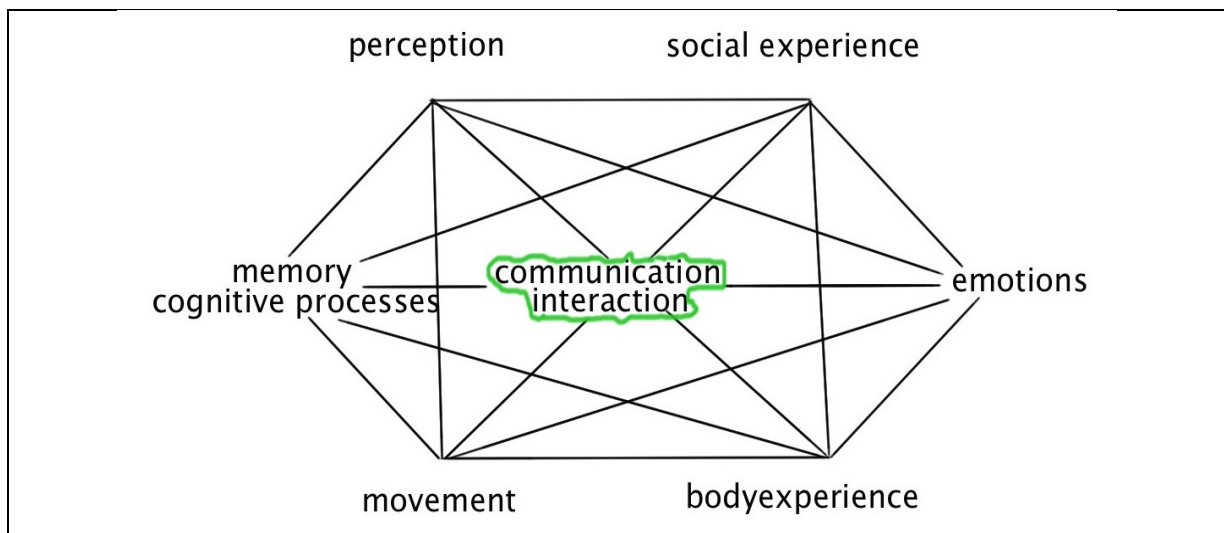


Fig. 2: holism (Fröhlich 2008, 64, translated by Falschlunger 2015)

Initiating of inter-action

Rhythmics may support the *initiating of interactions* in a very special way by using music, movement and materials as methodical means. They create 'space in-between', where communication is possible to initiate and interactions may get in a fluent process. The following sequence may demonstrate this:

A girl slaps her thigh repeatedly in a stereotypical manner. This expression is acknowledged by the group leader who puts a drum under her hand and after listening to her beat starts to sing to her rhythm in an improvised way. By re-acting on the beat (when the beat slows down the singing slows down as well) or by actively created acts from outside (e.g. variation of singing, intentionally use of phrasing by means of voice or any instrument, making use of stops) a single movement grows into a shared creative interaction which every participant can influence, stop or repeat.

In most cases the offering and perception of an instrument or a material (in this case a drum) already leads to re-actions, which may change a stereotypic movement from unconsciousness into consciousness. This can be seen and recognized for example by change in action or by change of mime for example by a smile. There can be noticed even more reactions when the group leader interacts socially by improvised singing or by playing an instrument to accompany the stereotypical movement.

Feedback processes through interactions may influence the following actions for example by stopping movements independently or by initiating and shaping a new creative dialogic process.

Which action is next?

This transcribed sequence was part of a Rhythmics class with four pupils with severe intellectual disabilities that took place every week. Some of the parts during the lessons repeat every week in nearly the same way – with little variations. The sequence described above shows its chances for all participants. The repetition supports the girl in her possibilities to act and re-act, because there is enough time and space, she is prepared and the material/instrument seems to be a motivating medium for inter-acting. During the interactive process the pupil acts in all eight functions mentioned above (according to Fröhlich 2008 and Garnitschnig/ Neira Zugasti 2006), even if she does not speak verbally:

- she *moves*, even if the movement is impaired,
- she *perceives* through different senses,
- she *thinks* and plans what she is going to do next,
- she *communicates*/*'speaks'* through mime and gesture,
- she acts *social-emotionally* by inter-acting,
- she shows her *will* to participate or not,
- she is *creative* in the way of using the material/instrument,
- and finally she *memorizes and remembers*.

This shows that interaction can support holistic development. But what makes the process interesting are not just the material and the different ways to act with it or the use of music in its various ways of expression. The contact person (me) plays an important role in offering and re-acting even on elementary expressions. Mall's (2004) *circle of communication* illustrates it like this:

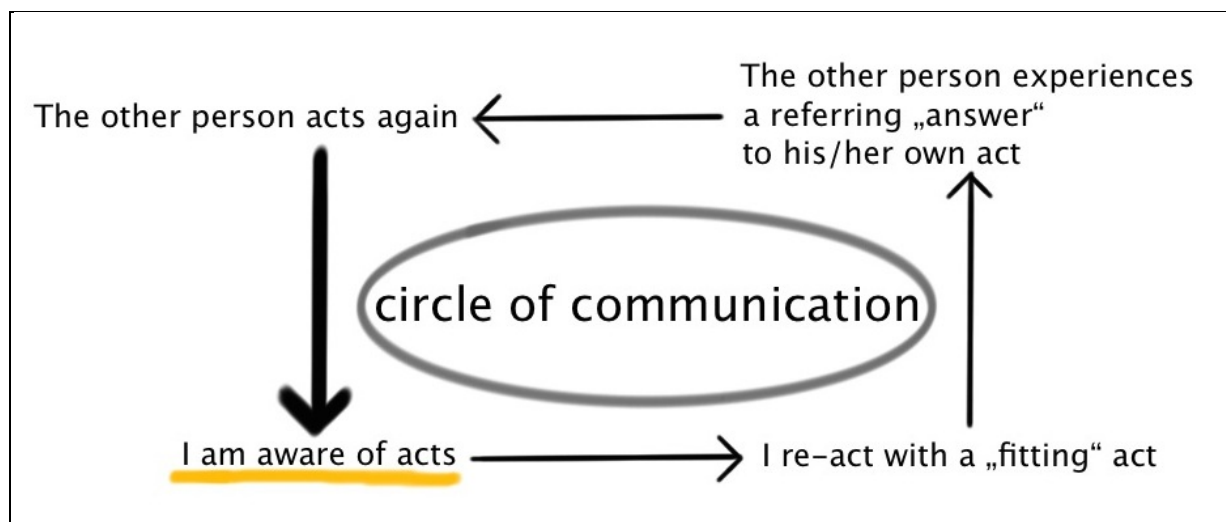


Fig. 3: Circle of communication (Mall 2007, 85, translated by Falschlunger 2015)

If Rhythmics is seen as an artistic-educational method dealing with rhythmical phenomena of polar and bi-polar processes, then this *circle of communication* by Mall could have its pendant in Rhythmics. Schaefer stresses in her German written book *Rhythmics as interactive pedagogical concept* (= *Rhythmik als interaktionspädagogisches Konzept*) the '*communicational acting*' (= *Kommunikatives Handeln*), which then is successful, if in interactive processes both partners find a definition of their situation together. (Schaefer 1992, 172) The feature is, that *both* of the partners always may influence the interaction.

This is a very important point, which – in Rhythmics classes – changes the point of view because interactive sequences make all participants valuable. Also in the described sequence above the interactions always offered the opportunity for both of us to continue or to stop.

Methodic approaches for interacting with people with severe intellectual disabilities

Within my mastertheses (Falschlunger 2011) I could observe, distill and demonstrate on seven methodic approaches through music, movement, materials and voice that lead to interactive processes. They are the solution of the differentiated analysis of interactive sequences during Rhythmics classes with pupils with severe intellectual disabilities (according to Falschlunger 2011, 102f; Falschlunger 2014a, 17, translated by Falschlunger):

to offer (' <i>anbieten</i> ')	focus is on perception through materials
to speak to (' <i>ansprechen</i> ')	verbal communication
to accompany (' <i>begleiten</i> ')	musical accompany of movements, music and movement in dialog
to acknowledge (' <i>bestätigen</i> ', ' <i>anerkennen</i> ')	give empathy
to touch (' <i>berühren</i> ')	directly, bodyoriented
to support (' <i>unterstützen</i> ')	indirect, bodyoriented
to wait for (' <i>abwarten</i> ')	give time

The special feature in Rhythmics is, that these approaches are part of each class (in different manner) and that they are embedded in the topic of the lesson. Therefore the following figure (according to Falschlunger 2011, 87, translated by Falschlunger) presents an overview of how Rhythmics classes can be organized and planned in the encounter with pupils with severe intellectual disabilities. Each part of the lesson opens 'space in-between' with the opportunity to get in inter-active contact.

The critical point on such figures is, that they show a theoretical structure, which should not just be used one by one. What counts are the participants in the here and now, in their physical and emotional condition. That requires openness to notice wellbeing in each part of the lesson and possibly to change or mix step 3, 4 or 5.

	aim	ideas
1 begin/ start	* ritual * perception of the group (me – you – we)	- "hello-song" - beginning-song - everybody of the group gets attention
2 bodyperception	* get in contact with parts of the body * deepening perception	- massage of bodyparts - shaking or slapping parts of the body (while singing a bodysong, rapping a bodytext or listening to music)

3 introduction/ leading to the 'theme' of the lesson	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * differentiated perception by using and stimulating different senses * cause interest 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - perceiving, touching materials - listening to a song (pulse) - touch, experience, listen to instruments
4 experience/ activity/ creativity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * self-activity * experience of self-activity * be part of the group (social-emotional acting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - experiences and differentiated perception through materials, instruments or songs - imitating, mirroring and continuing activities of the participants - create in and with music and/or movement
5 relax/ deepening	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * experience relaxing and silence * deepen body experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - listen to music fitting to the theme of the lesson - relax with the experienced material - listen to soft sounds of the instruments used in the lesson and relax
6 final/ closing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> * ritual to close 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - song or rap to finish - sound of an instrument as signal

‘Rooms in-between’ in my work

The following pictures present insights of my work with pupils with severe intellectual disabilities by illustrating some of the seven approaches for inter-action:

a) Slapping on any drum may provoke the teacher to sing a fitting song, to accompany an improvised melody with flute or to text and rap spontaneously to the developed rhythm.



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b) The waving shawls combined with sounds from an oceandrum or made by voice focus the senses and maybe motivate – after a stop – to initiate a new wave. Hidden in the hands and carefully opened the chiffon transforms into a growing flower. A simple sung melody may accompany the blooming.



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c) Playing the didgeridoo or the slitdrum causes interest because of its deep sound, the vibrations and the possibilities to slap and make own sounds.



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d) Easy playable instruments with interesting sounds and surfaces differentiate perception, deepen sensation and are well suitable to get in non-verbal interaction, if the teachers reaction starts out from the pupils action.



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Conclusion

Interactive sequences have a lot of positive effects and support the possibility for personal development. Rhythmics allows in many sequences to offer 'rooms in-between' through mediums that provoke actions, because they 'touch' the senses in different ways. So Rhythmics supports basic and elementary accesses for everybody – in a motivating way. My Rhythmics classes especially with people with severe intellectual disabilities always reflect to me, that there is a need for creative inter-actions: to live social contacts, to communicate emotionally and non-verbally and for self-development.

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Rhythmics – my “teaching style”

What makes Rhythmics so special for me is its ability to create a dialogue through music and movement, which touches people, encourages to express oneself and creates space for uninhibited and non-verbal encounters. I am still fascinated by the variety and depths of this pedagogical and artistic approach with various target groups.

I studied Rhythmics/Music and Movement Education at the University for Music and Performing Arts Vienna and I got to know several Rhythmics-teachers and their way of creating and leading through lessons. Further I am influenced by my daily work and all the personal encounters through music and movement with different target groups over years (children in schools, children having disabilities, inclusive groups, seniors with dementia, students with and without musical background, teachers in further education,...). All these encounters have shown me the wide spectrum of Rhythmics, its approaches and its affects.

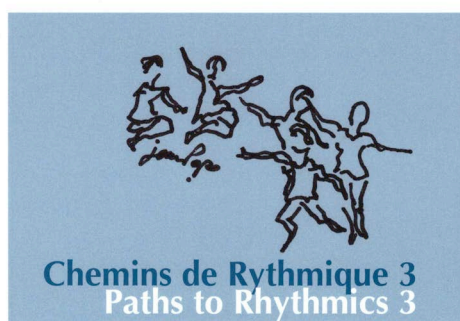
Three aspects are important for my work as Rhythmics-teacher:

- the **reciprocal influence within the use of music – movement – voice – materials** (e.g. improvised music accompanies and supports spontaneous movements; the moving of a chiffon scarf follows a simple improvised speech-melody),
- the **use of rhythmical phenomena** – bi-polarity, repetition, variation, order, synchronisation,... – **in planning and teaching** (e.g. silence follows activity; movement leads to a silent sequence in for example perceiving a wrapped up object that leads into a special activity; a short rhythm with boomwhackers created by one participant is repeated multiple times by the whole group and enters into a dialogue with an improvised melody on the piano; repetition and variation of a song – embedded in a story – during the lesson in different settings – with easy playable instruments, together with materials, in different dynamics,...)
- a **differentiated holistic way of observing** of the participants in their expression (mainly in the work with children and with people having disabilities), that consequently leads to the next step in **development-related planning and teaching**.

All this summarizes my definition of Rhythmics as *“an artistic-educational method or approach (seen as a process), that structures the correlation of rhythmical phenomena (e.g. bi-polarity, repetition, variation, order, synchronization, continuity) through the creative use of the means music and movement, as well as materials and voice – experienced in active sequences. In the process each participant’s individual and actual competences in expression count. The aim is to foster and support a holistic development – in movement, perception, thinking, communication/speaking, social-emotional acting, will, creativity and memorizing.”* (Falschlunger 2014b, 345, translated by Falschlunger)

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