

Learning with John: Building a context for relationship

by Janet Klees

John Hobson is one of the best community connectors that I know. Long ago we helped him to make a connection with a restaurant in his local community in order for him to have a local place to be late at night where he could hang out and help with other people of his age. Since then, together with family and supporters, we have helped John create the kinds of situations which bring meaning and people into his life. Often he has gone on to apply what he learns to further parts of his life as well.

John is an active man in his 40's who moved into his own apartment about twenty years ago. He is an avid hockey fan (Toronto Maple Leafs), a wrestling fan, loves travel brochures and loves his cell phone and the connections it affords him. John is a shy man at first, and a family man who adores his father and the newer family he has come to know through his stepmother.

Within a short time of John living on his own - present in his community in everyday ordinary ways - we began to understand that presence in community alone will not bring about the many advantages of being a full part of one's community, including the essential possibility of relationship. The unfolding of John's life in his community reminds us that it is important to carefully and thoughtfully work on practical strategies for building this level of belonging and relationship into people's lives. For the stories of John's life below, it will be important to understand that John has a very limited amount of paid support every week (about 7 hours), many hours of support from his Dad every week, and does not attend any programmes but lives life in ordinary ways - at home, at work and around his community.

With many families over many years, I have been working with strategies that help people connect with ordinary community life in effective ways. Early on we came to realize, that the mystery and wonder of relationships among humans is such that we cannot **create** relationship, but we can recognize, encourage, and design opportunities in which the miracle of relationship is more likely to occur.

One approach to designing such opportunities, I call **building a context for relationship**. This is a basic strategy that provides a way for the unique interests, skills and personality of the person to find common ground with like-minded others in their neighbourhood and

community. It greatly increases the chances that a deeper belonging and involvement for the person amid ordinary community life will arise because this is a strategy which allows for a sound way to offer one's contributions and build one's place within our community. And through all of this, this strategy increases the likelihood that some degree of relationship will result between the parties present.

Simply put, building a context for relationship outlines four dimensions that must be present (designed and supported as necessary) in order for any opportunity within our communities to reach its potential of providing richness, purpose, meaning and relationship to people's lives. These four dimensions include:

- PLACE - Being in a typical and familiar space in community
- PRESENCE - Where the person is present frequently, regularly and predictably
- ROLE - In a role that is familiar and well-suited to gifts and contribution this person can and wants to make
- PEOPLE - Within the appreciative presence of valued others.

When all four dimensions are in place, a person is present, in typical community spaces and typical pursuits, where they participate in and contribute to their community, in and among others in a wide range of relationships, where at least some are natural and unpaid.

These are the circumstances under which a person is most likely to find satisfying roles, the beginnings of relationship, and places of belonging in her community. The trick is to make sure that all four of these dimensions are actively in play at one time in a context which is always centred on the interests and personality of the individual. It is helpful to describe each of these in some detail.

PLACE

First of all, we need to discover one or more typical and valued **places, spaces and opportunities** in our community where other valued citizens (often of similar age and gender) who share some of the same interests as the focus person, spend their time and pursue this same interest. We need to ask: *What does this person like - things, experiences, environments - and where are the other people in this community who share the same likes and interests?*

For John, who is an ice hockey fan, those places include sports bars with television screens, local amateur hockey teams and clubs, local hockey games, local hockey arenas, skating rinks, radio stations broadcasting games, hockey magazines, hockey card collecting clubs, stores selling hockey stuff, hockey tournaments, guys watching hockey together at home,

and much more. Over time, we come back to this list again and again. Today, John is linked to two local hockey arenas, one local hockey team, and a hockey sports store.

John is a shy kind of person and we thought it was important to help him find work where he would have an easy and natural connection with others. John's many skills would allow us to search many different work places for him, however, we knew what would work best was to find a place in community where his natural passions and interests would put him in contact with like-minded others. So it was a natural fit to pursue local hockey arenas as a place of work. John has now worked as a hockey arena maintenance person for two companies for over 4 years. More importantly his love of hockey easily overcame his shyness and makes for an easy connection with him and his hockey-loving co-workers.

Finding good places in our ordinary community is important. However, many people with disabilities are supported to spend much or most of their time in "special" places where the commonality is disability - quite separate from the people with whom they might share a wide range of common and typical interests. These might be in group homes, disability day programmes, and special events. There may be many good reasons for this (funding, lack of vision, exhaustion, etc) but the fact is that for all the hours spent in segregated places, relationships with community members in typical ways cannot possibly develop. That time is NOT available for relationship of this kind and we need to ask - *how many hours per week does that leave in a person's week where they are available to be present in their community based on an interest they share with other non-disabled citizens?* When people are supported within places and opportunities that are set apart as "special" , then the first dimension of a **context for relationship** cannot be met during these hours.

PRESENCE

At the same time as being in community spaces, we need to ensure that these good community spaces are places where the person can be present **frequently** (often -so that they become comfortable with their surroundings, and others become comfortable with any differences in action, speech, etc.), **regularly** (same time and day of the week every single week), and **predictably** (so that others can miss him when he is absent) at these community places and opportunities – or be supported to do so.

A job, a volunteer role or a membership which involve some regular commitment over time are very typical ways to ensure this kind of presence. John has had enough regular, frequent time in his jobs to become very comfortable himself, for others to get to know him and his ways. This has meant that over time co-worker relationships have developed to the point of supportive and meaningful daily conversations, coffee breaks and interactions. But this extends to other areas as well. John figured out on his own that by taking a longer route to

work each week, he would walk by the same shops including his favourite - a travel agency and a dollar store. And he learned that by doing so several times a week on a regular basis he would see the same people in those stores again and again. Within a few months, John has a casual conversational relationship with travel agent and one of the store cashiers. He had created for himself yet another place of belonging in his community. John has recently joined the local gym and not only has he joined the one connected with his hockey arena, but also he goes there on a frequent and regular basis - as a first step in creating yet another place of welcome and belonging, and situating himself with others who share this interest and may come to know him.

However, very typically, people with disabilities are supported to be present in very different ways than these. They are often supported to be present at one-off spectacles and events (a local fair, a community family day at the park, an arts and crafts fair), or brought around to an endless variety of places in their community. Therefore, relationship based on reliable presence, growing familiarity, and common and sustaining interests is impossible. At the same time, it is equally impossible to gain skills and fulfill a life of purpose when one is doing unexpected and one-time events most of the time. The person is entertained rather than living their own life. It is impossible to develop identity, provide commitment and figure out genuine contribution in these conditions – but this happens all of the time.

ROLE

Equally important, and once again, at the same time as **place** and **presence**, we need to add in the dimension of finding ways to make sure that the person engages in a role - a reason to be there that tells others what you are likely to be doing, and sets expectations around your responsibilities value and worth. A person's role needs to be carefully worked out so that it is genuinely based on their interests, experiences and passions, is familiar, understandable, and typical for the place or opportunity and which is intense enough that it has many kinds of activities and tasks associated with it. For example, being a spectator of a music event is a very limited role; whereas being a volunteer at all of a band's local performances offers many tasks, responsibilities and options. Another way of making this last point is to be very clear about exploring what the contribution is within that role. I've learned that the heart of role is contribution.

So for John, at his places of work he is a hockey arena maintenance person. It is clear to others the kinds of work that he does, and the fact that it is paid employment adds an indication of its worth. These are all things that are familiar to others and therefore reinforce the idea that John is knowable and has much in common with their own lives. Within his job roles, John makes a contribution every day. However, it turns out that John is the best of the four employees to run the floor polishing machine and this (in addition to several other

things he does really well) is John's unique contribution to his place of work. His supervisors and co-workers would also say that his contributions include a great work ethic, an ability to bring out kindness and consideration in others, and helping to improve the communication skills of his supervisor!

John's cousins, Mary and Dave, understand the power of a good role in John's life and its impact in social connections for him. Recently, there was a surprise party for John's stepmother, at the local yacht club where Mary and Dave keep their yacht. The large and joyous gathering is one where John might have been a bit shy and kept to the edges of the group. However, with exceptional forethought, Mary and Dave had invited John over a week before the event specifically to show and talk about the features of the yacht and prepare John for a clear role at the party. In the middle of the party, Dave asked who would like a tour of the yacht and John stood up to lead the tour. As yacht tour guide, well prepared, John answered questions, took the lead and had lots to talk about with the guests and family members. A good intentional role with a distinct contribution made the day for John and helped others see a new side to the confident tour guide.

Again typically, people with disabilities are offered less than optimal conditions around role - if it is even thought of at all. Most often, people are simply offered the lacklustre roles of spectator and participant where no contribution is expected, no responsibility sought and no effort is made to match with the person's unique interests. In such situations, connections and relationship among people who see and understand their commonalities is highly unlikely. We need to be asking: *Who is the person going to be in this place and what is his contribution - time, delivering flyers, being a role model for others, welcoming, etc)?*

Similarly, when people are never offered roles but days filled with endless, purposeless activities (going for a walk, having an outing, shopping twice a day, watching television, going for drives), then the identities of people do not develop and other citizens will not recognize their common features. Recognizing, understanding and relating to each other's work, family, home, leisure and civic roles is one of the key ways in which all of us connect with each other and begin to have conversation and build a relationship.

PEOPLE

Finally, and again, within the same opportunity - where people are **present regularly and frequently in a community space** playing a **familiar role** - we need to make sure that situation being developed takes place in and among welcoming others who do not have a disability, where the where the focus is on shared geography (neighbours), kinship (family), interests, work (colleagues), and experiences rather than on shared disability or deficits. This is not a statement to devalue relationships between people with disabilities, but a frank assessment

of what is missing in the lives of people with disabilities, that being relationships with people of the same age who do not have disabilities. One feature of such people is that they are able to bring life-enriching experiences into the lives of the person with disability, and more importantly can plan key safeguarding roles at times of difficulty or challenge for the person. We need to start to intentionally focus some of our time and attention to building especially these kinds of relationship.

It is also essential that some of the people are present naturally, and are not paid to provide support. Such people provide many invaluable gestures to the person, such as welcome, hospitality, assistance, mutual support, asking for assistance, conferring a role, setting expectations high, providing moral support, being a role model, and offering mutual respect and admiration. Such relationships may begin, continue or be sustained with paid support as necessary. Paid support needs to be a **bridge** to relationship not the relationship itself. Paid support workers need to focus on always bringing a third person (or more) into the context they are building - otherwise the only relationship they are building is with themselves. And the one common element among paid support workers is that they will always need to move on.

For John, there has been a careful, intentional and ongoing focus of ensuring there are other people involved in his life whenever possible. This means that even when his second hockey arena job was going along very well from the point of view of job content and skills, we kept our job coach in place until we had found away to be sure that John was well-connected with his co-workers. This has taken some effort. Many of John's tasks are completed on his own in a large arena, and coffee break time is hard to pin down. Through trial and error we have found ways for John to check in every day with his supervisor - not necessary for work reasons, but essential for an early-day connection. Then John's supervisor stops by during at least one of his longer tasks and chats and comments. In fact, he often works alongside John for a bit which John really enjoys. At coffee break, the supervisor helps connect John to wherever the guys are having their break. Needless to say, the relationship between John and his supervisor has become very solid and it is obvious how much the supervisor gets out of the relationship.

At the restaurant, the scene of our first deliberate context building, we made sure that John was in the restaurant at least initially when there were other people working of his own age, and at close up time when they would have time to chat and work together. The result of this is that over the years, these relationships have been solid and essential to John's well being. He is invited to restaurant parties, and helped to make healthy meal choices for his regular meals there. He has very good, supportive and helpful long term relations with at least three people there, and good casual relations with at least 3-4 others at all times, More

importantly, one wait staff friend alerted his father when John went home sick one night - it turned out that John had pneumonia and might not have been seen for a couple more days by his Dad or support. This is the safeguarding element of relationship.

For many people with disabilities not enough thought is given to other people present. When people are toured around in endless small groupings of people with disability, or spend their time in 1:1 support situations where unpaid others are not present, then the ability of valuable paid support persons is prevented from being the bridge to friendship, and no mutual and safeguarding relationship between valued citizens and this person can begin, be nurtured and grow.

The nature of this four dimensional context for relationship (place, presence, role, people) is that if any of the dimensions fail, if any of the four pillars that hold up this context are not honoured, then we may be doing other laudable things, but we are not likely building contexts where relationship can thrive. Our community support and services offer many lessons of what happens when all four dimensions are not addressed. Most often we see that people are not supported to be in ordinary community without others with disabilities often enough or frequently and regularly enough to make a difference. Often people are present but not in the right way. Often, people are present in good places, but there is no one around with whom they might have a relationship. And often people are not engaged with other with whom they share a true interest, passion or common experience. In each scenario, a least one of these dimensions is not fully in play.

Finally, people will talk about their fear of or experience of rejection, exclusion, or distancing encountered within typical community life. It is almost always a matter of poor strategy, technique, or support. Use these as learning opportunities by applying the four dimensions of the context for relationship. There will be one that is missing. Additionally, in ordinary life, most of us have many, many opportunities every week where the circumstances are those outlined by the four pillars. For many people with disabilities, we create one such opportunity and are disappointed when deep relationship does not spontaneously arrive. This work takes good strategy and crafting at the outset. It must be repeated in many different situations so that the person gets many chances to shine. We must be ready to shore it up when a pillar becomes weak. And it takes time – the best results happen over years rather than days, weeks or months.

We need to become serious about taking full advantage of the richly rewarding and essentially safeguarding aspects of community life. And to do this, we need to seriously think, plan and implement strategies that allow us to build full, personally meaningful lives

based on genuine interests and focused on contribution in and among other members of one's community. People individually stand to gain belonging, identity and relationship from such thoughtful situations which are both richer and safer than the alternatives. And our whole community stands to re-gain the gifts and contributions lost on its way to valuing speed, productivity, material wealth, and a relentless focus on the future – the gifts of presence, joy, being in the moment, fragility, love and tolerance. There is really no choice! Community is better for us all when we all belong and all contribute in genuine and meaningful ways.

As I said, John is a natural at learning how to create even more connections and degrees of relationship for himself once we had learned the basics. About three years after helping to establish himself as a helpful presence at the restaurant, he started to talk about a local coffee shop. It turns out that several night of the week he had started to drop by a quiet little coffee shop where a young man, Amed, was the only person working. John began to do what he was already doing at the restaurant - helping out with wiping off a table, returning some cups to the kitchen and more. After that Amed would pour him a free coffee, offer a donut and the two would sit and chat. John had figured out all of the elements of place, presence, role and people to put in place another relationship for himself. Since then we occasionally hear of another person, another place of belonging, or another role that John has created for himself in community. All of these demonstrate the juggle of place, presence, role and people with the skill of experience and mastery.

For those readers who read John's stories and think this is only possible because he has a number of clear interests, because he can express himself fairly well, or because he can make his own way through his community, well I have two things to say - how many people much like John do you know who are nonetheless not connected and engaged, and well, you need to ask me about Rob!

Many thanks to Erin Rosemund (job developer) and Rob Dallaire (supporter/job coach) for their ability to imagine what could be, keen observations, creative support and deep desire for John to do well.

This article was recently printing in Thinking About...a publication of Belonging Matters in Melbourne, Australia.