

Aphasia groups and centers share the goal of helping individuals live successfully with aphasia. Benefits include meeting others with aphasia, establishing friendships, building self-confidence, and accessing a supportive communicative environment that offers meaningful educational and recreational activities (Elman, 2007). This paper describes an innovative approach used at a community based aphasia center to foster participation by persons with aphasia (PWA) in an aspect of the creative arts that might be considered “off limits” for them – musical theater.

While there is substantial literature attesting to the benefits of music and art therapies for PWA (Hobson, 2006; Peterson, 2006), there is little concerning their participation in theater. Although psychodrama (Moreno, 1985) and other less analytically oriented approaches have demonstrated the value of drama groups in increasing confidence, belonging, and group cohesion across a range of disabling conditions (Landy, 1994), they are seldom undertaken with PWA: it is assumed that the barriers imposed by the speech/language impairment preclude participation. Nevertheless, organizations such as Theatre Aphasique (Croteau, Dorze, Marcoux-Fortier, & Getty, 2008) and the Aphasia Institute (<http://www.aphasia.ca/programs/reference.pdf>) suggest that PWA can benefit from theatrical activities.

Accordingly, in 2006, a community based aphasia center began a theater program for its members. It encourages participation regardless of aphasia type and severity or theater background. To date, the Center has presented three yearly aphasia-friendly musical theater productions. The number of participants each year was 17, 25, and 23, respectively. This proposal describes the Center’s theater program and provides qualitative data regarding the benefits members have gained from participation. If this proposal is accepted, video clips will be included.

Methods

Program Overview

The musical production involves 12-weeks of rehearsals culminating in matinee and evening performances at the Center for family, friends, and community supporters. The program is open to all Center members, who can choose it from a variety of program offerings. Prior to casting and rehearsing, two SLPs, who function as “drama coaches,” create an aphasia-friendly adaptation of the selected musical. This adaptation carries the story line through scenes, music, and narration. The script encompasses abbreviated scenes, simplified language, pictures, and visual, written, and gestural accompaniments. The musical score is condensed and choreography adapted to meet participant needs. Additional adaptive changes can occur throughout the rehearsal process.

Casting

At the first rehearsal, participants view scenes from the film version to become acquainted with characters, storylines, and music. PWA volunteer for desired roles. Peers vote anonymously to cast each role. Those who choose not to perform on stage participate in costume and set design and construction. Actors receive an aphasia-friendly script, stage directions, song lyrics, and music for home practice.

Rehearsals

Two-hour rehearsals occur weekly. Participants view scenes with the drama coaches, who highlight relevant script, choreography, and props. Drama coaches re-enact the scenes, then actors rehearse while the set crew creates scenery.

Final Performance

Approximately 400 people attend the final performances, which begin with a brief introduction on how aphasia may influence the show. A PWA then takes over as emcee, providing narration and entertainment between scenes. The performance is videotaped, and short segments of the videos will be incorporated into this presentation.

Data

For the 2008 program, a pre-participation survey (see Appendix A) was completed by first time participants during the first week of rehearsals to determine why they joined the program.

First time and veteran participants also completed a post-participation survey (see Appendix B) after the final performance to identify the most rewarding outcome of the program. Surveys were based on benefits reported in the literature and those identified by drama coaches during the previous two programs.

Finally, participant and caregiver comments when discussing the experience were compiled to identify potential benefits of participation. This final component is included in the discussion section concluding this proposal.

Results

In 2008, 12 members signed up to participate in the program for the first time. Nine first time participants completed the pre-participation survey. Table 1 details their responses.

A total of 23 members participated in the entire program, eight first time participants and 15 veteran participants. Twenty participants completed the post-participation survey. Response to one survey was deemed unreliable and excluded, resulting in a total of 19 survey responses: eight first timers and 11 veterans. Table 2 details the responses.

Although respondents in both groups indicated benefits related to challenging oneself, having fun, performing for a group, and teamwork, only first time participants selected the benefit of returning to performing and only veteran participants selected increased confidence. More than half of the first time respondents (N=5) found the challenge and teamwork most beneficial while more than half of the veteran respondents (N=7) found increased confidence and having fun were most beneficial.

Eighteen of the participants also responded to questions related to willingness to participate in a theater program before and after acquiring aphasia. Although 11 of 18 respondents indicated a willingness to participate in a theater program before acquiring aphasia, 12 of 18 respondents would not have considered participating after acquiring aphasia and prior to being offered the opportunity at the Center.

Discussion

Participant and caregiver feedback regarding the benefits to participation in an aphasia friendly theater program fell into the following three categories: psychosocial, linguistic, and recreational/vocational. This is consistent with the identified goals of participating in larger scale performance arts programs such as Theatre Aphasique. Each category is briefly defined below. Supporting comments and examples will be included in the full presentation.

Psychosocial

The program empowers participants by allowing everyone to take part, regardless of aphasia severity, physical impairment, or previous theatrical experience. It affords an opportunity for a group of PWA to collaborate, coach, and support each other during rehearsals. Pleasure and hope results from observing peers' successes. PWA experience the camaraderie and increased confidence characteristic of traditional theater groups. Family, friends, and caregivers benefit by seeing their loved one's range of capabilities.

Linguistic

Participation encourages spontaneous communication and improvisation in a relaxed and predictable environment. Prepared scripts allow for repetitive linguistic practice. Opportunities to communicate using various modalities and communication strategies are provided.

Recreational/vocational

No previous theater experience is required. Participation provides the opportunity to discover a new talent, learn a new skill, or return to a valued, meaningful activity.

Conclusion

Results of surveys and discussions following participation in a theater program for PWA provide preliminary support for several potential program benefits. PWA experience joy, teamwork, and increased self confidence while accepting a new challenge and coaching each other. Family, friends, and caregivers witness their loved ones empowered and bringing joy to others. While logistics may limit the feasibility of staging a full production with smaller aphasia groups, it is hypothesized that the identified benefits would likely result from other theater forms such as an improv group or one-act play. Further exploration of aphasia theater programs is necessary to refine or identify additional benefits, examine the most beneficial components, and determine the impact of aphasia type/severity or other personal factors on the experience.

References

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Table 1

First Time Participants' Reasons for Joining the Aphasia Theater Program

Reason	No. responses
I wanted to try something new	3
It seemed like fun	3
I liked the selected show/music	1
Another member suggested it	1
I didn't like other program choices offered at that time	1
Total respondents	9

Table 2

Most Rewarding Benefit of Participation in an Aphasia Theater Program for First Time and Veteran Participants

Outcome	First time participants	Veteran participants
Having fun	1	4
Teamwork	2	1
Returning to performing	1	0
Challenging myself	3	1
Performing for a group	1	2
Increased confidence	0	3
Total respondents	8	11