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Transactional Analysis Journal

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Paper:

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Article

Transactional Analysis and the Ludic Third (TALT): A Model of Functionally Fluent Reflective Play Practice

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Abstract

This article presents a new theoretical model of the play interaction between children and playworkers: transactional analysis and the ludic third (TALT). The importance of reflective professional practice as a key aspect of the TALT model is emphasized. The transactional analysis concepts of the *integrating Adult ego state* and *functional fluency* are presented to show how they are put to use both in reflective practice and for underpinning the vital concept of the *witness position* aspect of the play process. The values of knowledgeable, sensitive, and above all active responsiveness from the witness position are explained with short case studies. This active role is discussed with regard to the concepts of *potential space* and the *ludic third*. The authors suggest that TALT has implications for all professionals who work with children in a play context and consider the potential for children to develop reflective skills as they play.

Keywords

Transactional analysis; functional fluency; behavioral modes; response or reaction; integrating Adult; play process; playworker; play cycle; witness position; reflective practice; ludic third

> They **** you up, your mum and dad.
> They may not mean to, but they do.
> They fill you with faults they had
> And add some extra, just for you.
>
> They make you great, your mum and dad,
> They may not mean to, but they do,
> They fill you with talents they had
> And add some extra, just for you.
> (Larkin, 1988, p. 180)

Larkin's pessimistic and optimistic view of the role of parents in relation to their child has a strong element of truth. Parents pass on not only faults but also positive qualities. This has been explored in relation to attachment theory (Bowlby, 1954), maternal deprivation (Rutter, 1981), potential space (Winnicott, 1971), and the role of the adult in children's holistic development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). The habits of adults, whether perceived by others as good or bad, honorable or dishonorable, have an impact on children's psychological development.

Over the last 30 years in the United Kingdom, the profession of *playwork* has increased with adult and child interactions in adventure playgrounds, holiday playschemes, after school clubs, and children's local parks and open spaces. Playwork, as defined by SkillsActive (2010), is "a highly skilled profession that enriches and enhances provision for children's play. It takes place where adults support children's play but it is not driven by prescribed education or care outcomes" (p. 3). It is characterized by eight playwork principles (Playwork Principles Scrutiny Group [PPSG], 2005) whereby the playworker supports the play process of children, facilitates play spaces for play,

and is a play advocate. This growth in different types of adult supervised provision occurred in the United Kingdom through government-funded programs in the 1980s and 1990s and was followed by funding through the BIG Lottery fund. The result has been an increase in children playing more in structured environments such as out-of-school provision (Smith & Barker, 2000) and, more recently, in the increase of mobile playworkers, or playrangers, who support children's play in their local parks and open spaces (King, 2015; King & Sills-Jones, 2018).

With the increase in the number of children attending play environments where playworkers are present, the role of parents as described by Larkin in the opening verse of his poem may have now taken another twist. If, as Larkin suggested with parents, other adults play an important role in children's lives, this must include playworkers. Any professional who works with children and/or young people (e.g., youth workers, community workers, social workers, etc.) will need to take what Sturrock (2003) called the *witness position* to be fully effective. By witness position he was referring to maintaining self-awareness while engaging in playwork practice.

The play space is the natural therapeutic space of children (Sturrock & Else, 1998), and, as adults working in this space, the way that playworkers communicate with children is vitally important. Supporting the process of children's play involves responding to *play cues,* that is, to the signals children send to indicate they are ready or want to play. It is the nature of these responses—which are called *play returns*—that is the key to effective, reflective playwork practice.

This article describes a model of reflective playwork practice to demonstrate in a practical way how the witness position can be understood and implemented by the playworker. The model also identifies the potential for children to be reflective and to develop their own witness position.

The Play Process and Playwork Practice

The play process was described in detail and termed the *play cycle* by Sturrock and Else (1998). It can be summarized as follows. The child has an inner and outer view of the world (Meares, 1993), and the start of the play process consists of a play cue (i.e., a signal for play) that is derived from the "meta-lude" (Sturrock & Else, 1998, p. 82) or child's inner psyche. The cue enters the outer (public) world and is time limited. If it is picked up by another person, the response is a play return (Sturrock & Else, 1998) or active development of the cue. The play return is processed back into the meta-lude, where the play cue was issued, and if the child responds to the any aspect of the play return, this is termed the *loop* or *flow* and the play cycle continues. Flow was described by Csikszentmihalyi (1975) as "the holistic sensation that people feel when they act with total involvement" (p. 36), during which the person—in this case a child—is so absorbed in his or her play that he or she has a total disregard for aspects such as time. The cue, time, return, and loop and flow constitute the play (ludic) cycle. The area in which the play cycle takes place within the play space is known as a *play frame* (Sturrock & Else, 1998). The play frame can have a physical or nonphysical boundary within the play space. The last aspect of the play process is when the play cycle finishes, which Sturrock and Else (1998) call *annihilation.* An understanding and sensitivity to the play process is fundamental to playwork practice.

Playwork practice within the United Kingdom is underpinned by the eight playwork principles, which "establish the professional and ethical framework for playwork" (PPSG, 2005, para. 1). The importance of the play process in relation to professional playwork practice is reflected in both playwork principle 2, which outlines play as a process, and playwork principle 3, which says that "the prime focus and essence of playwork is to support and facilitate the play process" (PPSG, 2005, para. 4). The playworker's professional practice, regardless of how well intentioned, needs to be reflective and show self-awareness of how the worker's practice may influence the play process (King, 2015; Kilvington & Wood, 2010). This is clearly stated in playwork principle 6: "The playworker's response to children and young people playing is based on a sound up to date knowledge of the play process, and reflective practice" (PPSG, 2005, para. 7).

Thus, from a professional playwork practice perspective, the playworker needs to have sound knowledge of the play process and to engage in reflective practice. This self-awareness of practice has been described as the "witness position" (Sturrock, 2003, p. 38) or the "watcher self" (Sturrock, 1999, p. 127). From this position, playworkers are continually self-evaluating their professional practice, which relates to their choice of behavior when supporting the play process. The witness position helps playworkers to reflect on what is happening within the play cycle and to support it as well as to be self-aware so that they do not take over or dominate the play process, what Sturrock and Else (1998) called *adulteration* (p. 93).

Reflective Practice and Playworkers' Behavioral Choice

Reflective practice is a psychological process that involves reflecting both on action (what has taken place) and in action (what is happening in the present) (Scan, 1983). The work of playworkers supporting the play process can be considered to be in the here and now (Lester & Russell, 2010), and the importance of making appropriate choices will involve their prior knowledge and experiences. Playworkers need to be grounded, that is, aware of their choice of response, and reflective throughout their professional practice. They must be able to respond to the here and now of children's play and to be what Newstead (2017) referred to as a "present tense professionals]" (p. 25). This conscious awareness of reflecting on the here and how resonates with being in an integrating Adult ego state (Tudor, 2003). The task for playworkers is to stay in Adult when supporting children in their play. In an integrating Adult ego state, the playworker has a choice of options for how to behave.

Staying in Adult: The Conceptual Connections Between the TA Integrating Adult Model of Ego States and the Functional Fluency Model

Insert Figure 1 about here
Ego States and Functional Fluency

Figure 1 shows the conceptual connections between the integrating Adult model of ego states and the functional fluency model (Temple, 2015) so as to clarify their use in explaining people's psychological states and their related behavior patterns. It highlights the difference between being in an Adult ego state, in which choosing here-and-now behavioral options is possible, and in a Child or Parent ego state, in which it is not.

   The essence of being in an integrating Adult ego state is being grounded in the here and now using our up-to-date wisdom, know-how, skills, and intuition for assessing current reality. Such assessment uses energy internally to prepare for making choices about what to do or say moment by moment. It involves taking into account what seems relevant right now, sorting out the most significant matters, considering the implications of various possible actions, and imagining which consequences would help or hinder a desired outcome. This could be for an instant survival decision, or, for example, regarding an intervention to make in a playwork context. (Note that, behaviorally, this is the use of the accounting mode, which is at the center of the functional fluency model; see Temple 2015.)

   If a person is triggered out of Adult into a Child or Parent ego state, however, his or her internal context will have more to do with the past than the present, and his or her behavior will be outside of here-and-now awareness, more of an automatic, transferential reenactment as in regression. That is why it is so important to stay in the Adult ego state in a playwork context.

   The other connection involves the ego state concept of *contamination* (Tilney, 1998). Figure 1 shows both Parent and Child contaminated areas of the Adult. In that case, the energy of the Adult is still influenced by old teachings and learnings from the past. Energetically, these areas of the Adult can be thought of as sources of behavioral habits that are more reactionary than responsive. These are depicted as the four negative (less effective) modes of the functional fluency model. Use of these modes lacks accounting.

   The message of Figure 1, therefore, is to stay in Adult, avoid using the four negative modes, and decide how to respond using the five positive modes. The accounting mode is used to accomplish this, which is what makes it such a key mode of the functional fluency model and such an important aspect of our human talent for using practical reflection (Newstead, 2017) to enhance effective behavior.

Figure 2 about here
The Functional Fluency Model Has Nine Modes of Behavior

   Figure 2 elaborates on Figure 1 by providing the details of the functional fluency model that demonstrate its relevance to helping playworkers consider and choose their behavior in their reflective professional practice. It shows how the model works as a map or menu for increasing professional effectiveness by illustrating the crucial difference between the positive and negative ways of guiding and directing, looking after people, relating to others, and doing one's own thing. Most importantly, accounting, the central connecting mode that uses energy internally, illustrates the use of reflection for choosing how to behave. Thus, the integrating Adult and functional fluency concepts underpin an understanding of the interactions that take place between the child and the playworker within the play process, and therefore within the TALT (transactional analysis and the ludic third) model being proposed in

this article.

The Play Process, the Play Space, Potential Space, and the Ludic Third

The play process consists of the play cycle, which includes the play cue, play return, and play frame, the latter of which will occur within a defined area or play space. This play space can be as large as a sports field or as small as the space under a kitchen table. The play cycle will exist in two domains of the child's experience: the inner world (mind) and the outer world. This is discussed in relation to the concepts of *potential space* (Winnicott, 1971) and the *ludic third* (Sturrock, 2003).

Fink (1968) wrote the following about the philosophical role of play in human existence: "The play thing alone is enough to assure us that play does not take place in pure subjectivity without any reference to the concrete world around us. The play world contains both subjective imaginary elements and objective ontic elements" (p. 27).

Winnicott (1971) also considered the importance of play and how through play in the *third area* or potential space, cultural experiences take place. This third area or potential space is the interface between the inner psychic reality and the external world, that is, the subjective inner world of the person and the objective outer world. Winnicott determined that this is where creativity—that is, play—occurs.

Within a play cycle, the playing person's inner thoughts and external experiences merge with other playing partners' inner thoughts and external experiences. This is the basis of Sturrock's (2003) ludic third, developed from Ogden's (1994) concept of the *analytical third* and Winnicott's (1971) potential space or third area. The ludic third considers the relationship between a child and an adult and views it as the interplay of three subjectivities: the subjectivity of the child, the subjectivity of the adult, and the ludic third. The ludic third comprises the relationship between the first player and the second and, at the same time, what is created between them. In relation to playwork practice, this would be the playworker, the child, and what emerges. For example, they could both be involved in fantasy play or role-play combining the inner subjectivities of both players. The aspect of this sharing or cocreation has also been considered within transactional analysis (Tudor & Summers, 2014) and within preschool learning with regards to sustained/shared thinking (Siraj-Blatchford, 2009).

The play process outlined by Sturrock and Else is shown in Figure 3, a simplified diagram of the play process that considers Else's (1999/2005, 2009) integrating play framework and Meares's (1993) private and public worlds.

Insert Figure 3 about here
Play Cycle and Third Area or Ludic Third

As described earlier, an important aspect of the play cycle is that the adult does not take it over or use it for his or her own ends. Such adulteration (Sturrock & Else, 1998) is illustrated within the functional fluency model by the playworker reacting by dominating or resisting rather than responding by nurturing or cooperating. Although it is important that children be free to play and choose their behavior, for the playworker the focus needs to be on responding with positive behavior as well as reflecting on his or her professional practice (accounting). Thus, rather than reacting, playworkers need to respond, and, as Sturrock (2003) explained, be aware of their own emotions and reveries, use them in the context of the playing child, and be aware they are doing so. This is what Sturrock (1999, 2003) and Sturrock and Else (1998) meant when they referred to the witness position. That position reflects the five positive ways of responding described in the functional fluency model. Temple (2015) referred to these as being tuned in to the present rather than slipping into negative reactions derived from old habits.

We propose that playworkers need to adopt this witness position while in an integrating Adult ego state so that they can choose to respond rather than react. This enables them to evaluate objectively their playwork practice in the here and now so as not to take over the child's play. The witness position should enable playworkers to keep their own emotional experiences in check so they can focus on the child's play needs, not their own. This would avoid or at least help them to be aware of any reactive negative behavior (e.g., dominating the child's play). The witness position can be adopted within any of the four levels of adult intervention identified by Sturrock and Else (1998): play maintenance, simple involvement, medial intervention, and complex intervention.

Levels of Adult Intervention and Responding

Play maintenance involves adults taking a passive role in the child's play frame and simply observing and not taking

an active role in the play cycle. This is the best playwork practice because the adult minimally influences the child's play. However, children do like and want adult interaction in their play (although not all the time), and often the playworker is invited into the play. This increases in complexity from simple involvement to complex intervention. However, at each level of intervention, the playworker needs to be in an integrating Adult ego state and using the positive functional fluency modes.

With simple involvement, the playworker has a containing role and when asked may supply resources or ideas for play. For example, children may be involved in a game or activity that does not involve the adult at all, or a child might be coloring and ask for a specific color of pencil that the adult finds or directs the child to. The adult is responding to the child's play cues and is not an active part of the play cycle; his or her involvement is on the edge of the play cycle, only there to return a play cue to help sustain the play cycle.

Alternatively, adults become more involved in a play cycle within medial and complex interventions. In medial intervention, the adult actively participates in the play cycle, such as playing tennis or a board game or making a puppet. However, the play cycle remains predominantly child led with the adult responding to the child's cues, even though the playworker may sometimes issue a play cue to try and maintain the play cycle.

With complex interventions, the adult not only responds to cues sent by the child but also sends out cues to the child. This intense play could be something the child initiates that includes the adult in some sociodramatic play, role-play, or even a creative activity such as producing a mural. What is significant in complex interventions is that the play develops between both the adult (playworker) and the child in the third or ludic area. Playworkers need to maintain their integrating Adult ego state so their own fears, anxieties, experiences, or expectations do not adulterate the play frame (Sturrock & Else, 1998). The playworker remains in the witness position and is thus able to best support the child's play process. From the witness position, the playworker:

- Supports the play process by responding positively to the child's play in the here and now from the integrating Adult ego state
- Does not adulterate the play process by responding negatively to the child's play. Temple (2009/2017) referred to that as slipping into "old habits" (p. 5), which can take over the child's play.
- Is able to reflect widely during practice and avoids (consciously or unconsciously) playing out his or her own unplayed-out material, such as regressing into old feelings or reenacting experiences from the past (Sturrock & Else, 1998)

To achieve all of this, the playworker's appropriate responsiveness puts the following principles into practice in this third or ludic space, thus allowing the child to play in the way that he or she wants or needs to.

- The playworker's cues and returns must not take over the play cycle (adulterate).
- If the playworker's cue is not returned, then it should not be forced on the child.
- As soon as the child leaves the third or ludic space, so should the playworker.

This is illustrated in the following two real-life scenarios. Although not a direct playwork example, the principles of playwork practice were involved.

Tidying up the living room, I (Peter) found myself on my hands and knees when suddenly my 4-year-old daughter jumped onto my back with the words "Giddy up, horsey!" This was a clear cue to play. My response—the play return—was to pretend to be a horse. Suddenly, in the space of a few seconds, I had been transformed from being dad tidying up to a horse. Then my 18-month-old son climbed on board, and as I "trotted" around the room, I was fed Lego® bricks and put into various dark spaces to sleep. Once I "woke up," both children climbed aboard again. This time I was waiting, and being near the sofa, I decided to fling them both off. The response from my children was "Again, again," and we continued until it was time for me to eat more Legos® and sleep. This play episode lasted over 20 minutes and would have lasted longer if my knees had not given out. What was more interesting was the fact that an 18-month-old boy and a 2-year-old girl were engaged in a play activity for over 20 minutes. Children in this age range usually do not engage in an activity for so long but "flit" from one play activity to another.

On that occasion, I was playing with my children in my integrating Adult ego state, using the positive functional fluency modes (Temple, 2015). When my daughter jumped onto my back, I could have responded with negative behavior (punitive or submissive), by which I could have stopped the play immediately, or gone along with it with selfish enthusiasm or intent to take part (egocentric). Instead, my behavior was positive by being structuring and nurturing (accepting and inspiring), and eventually I issued my own play cue (flinging the children off my back) and

thus demonstrated cooperative and spontaneous creative behavior. All the time I was being a horse I was still aware I was dad and therefore socially responsible. Throughout, I was taking account of my behavior (aware, alert, rational, and evaluative), that is, I was in the witness position making sure I was not dominating and taking over the play but being sensitive to my children's needs and wants.

Another example of a complex intervention was the day my daughter, age 4, had to go to the doctor for her immunization injections prior to starting full-time education in the United Kingdom. Regardless of the prewarning and explaining I provided, it had no bearing on my daughter's experience of the injection administered by the nurse. My daughter gave a little "yelp" as the needle went in. When we got home, my daughter went to her toy doctor set, found the plastic toy syringe, and asked me to lie down. During the following 20 minutes or so I must have had over 50 injections, each one reenacting what had taken place in the doctor's surgery. I was careful on each injection to give a "yelp." It was interesting to me that my daughter took on the role of the nurse with me as the patient rather than my daughter being the patient reliving the experience. Instead, in the role-play I had to live the experience as the patient. Each injection replayed the event, with a dialogue taking place between the two of us prior to and after my yelp.

This play episode was important for my daughter as a way to play out the experience, something that Freud (1900) believed was important for children so they gain both understanding and acceptance of an event. My role was to mirror my daughter's experience and play the patient (based on my observations from being there) using accounting to help me choose positively responsive behavior like nurturing (understanding) and cooperating (considerate) but not dominating (bossy) or marshmallowing (smothering). As for my daughter, she took on the role of the nurse, which could be argued was from a Parent ego state, rather than relive the experience from a Child ego state. This is why it is important for children to be allowed to decide which ego state to be in when playing; it allows them to develop their own understanding of experiences. Children are thereby able to reflect and in time to respond and react to situations from their own integrated Adult ego state, that is, to be reflective and to play from their own witness position. Play provides a safe space in which this can happen.

Both of the situations just described were complex interventions in which both the adult and the children were playing in the ludic third. I was involved as the parent responding from the witness position to my child's play in the here and now. These are two positive aspects of the play cycle, but if the child's play cycle is interrupted, this can result in a negative reaction. For example, once I took my 2-year-old son with me when I had an appointment with my doctor. While I was discussing my symptoms, my son was busy playing with a small box of construction blocks that were in the doctor's surgery. On finishing the consultation, I picked up my son saying, "Time to go." My son, having been taken away from his construction blocks, cried hysterically. This illustrates what can happen if the child's play cycle is interrupted or finished by other factors than the child himself or herself. With no attention being paid to my son's play with the blocks, he could have been developing his own world, possibly deep in the ludic third. Just as when one is suddenly awakened from sleep, disrupting the play cycle when the child is absorbed in play can be disorienting and lead to a negative reaction that Sturrock and Else (1998) called *dysplay*. This occurs when the child is "unable, for whatever reason, to play out, fully to express the meaning of their particular play" (p. 91). This is what happened with my son.

We are sure many parents have had similar experiences and responded in the same way. However, playworkers as professionals must respond more consciously from their integrating Adult with awareness and understanding and using reflective practice to support the play process (Kilvington & Wood, 2010).

Conclusion and Further Considerations

Professional practice and children's play exists across many domains, including education, health and well-being, therapy, and recreation. This article presents a new model for effective playwork practice, one that combines transactional analysis and the ludic third (TALT) and uses concepts from the integrating Adult model of ego states and the functional fluency model of human social behavior. We have outlined how these concepts support playworkers' understanding and skills in effective and appropriate interactions with children at play. TALT contextualizes this self-aware practice in the witness position as the necessary core of valuable therapeutic play process, which includes the play space, potential space, and the ludic third. The play space is the area in which play takes place, the potential space is where the inner subjectivity and outer objectivity meet, and the ludic third is a development of the potential space and what is created in the play between the adult (playworker) and the child. In working from the witness position, the playworker supports the play process by using a nondirective play approach that supports the child's play cycle by observing, acting as a resource, or interacting in deep interplay with the child.

This nondirective approach is similar to Axline's (1947) nondirective play therapy in that the child leads and the adult responds. A playworker is not a trained therapist, but as Sturrock and Else's (1998) wrote, the key aspect of the play space is that it is a "therapeutic space" (p. 74) that is the natural healing space for children.

The history of the nondirective use of play can be traced back to the principles of Rogers's (1951) person-centered therapy and Axline's (1947) eight principles of nondirective therapy (Wilson & Ryan, 2005). Rogers's (1989) work is based on three qualities: genuineness, realness, or congruence; unconditional positive regard; and empathic understanding. And Axline's eight principles reflect those qualities by putting the child at the center of the process. Another advantage of the TALT model in playwork practice is that it helps children develop their own reflective practice skills by supporting their play and not taking it over. This enables children, in the safe space of playing, to explore, experiment, and provide explanations for their experiences through play. Regardless of the form of the play—whether it is fantasy, social, or physical in nature—children need the time and space to play out scenarios, differentiate what is real from what is fantasy, and develop their own likes, interests, and personality. As Winnicott (1971) wrote, "It is in playing and only in playing that the individual child or adult is able to be creative and to use the whole personality, and it is only in being creative that the individual discovers the self" (p. 54).

The key value of the playworker in a nondirective approach is accepting children for who they are and with awareness of their feelings. As with good therapists, good playworkers need to be "simultaneously aware and accepting of their own thoughts, feelings, and reactions to their clients and to the clients' thoughts, feelings, and reactions to the counsellor" (Ray, Jayne, & Stulmaker, 2014, p. 22).

This is what Sturrock (1999, 2003) meant in describing playworkers being in the witness position continuously reflecting on their own thoughts, feelings, and reverie when in a play cycle with children. To do this and be able to have unconditional positive regard, to be nonjudgmental and reflect on the here-and-now aspect of the play, playworkers need to be in an integrating Adult ego state and responding effectively in a functionally fluent way (Temple, 2015).

Disclosure statement

Funding

Notes on Contributor

Dr. Pete King is currently a lecturer in childhood studies at Swansea University, Wales, United Kingdom. Prior to this, he was employed in the field of play and playwork and had a particularly interest in therapeutic playwork in which children's natural urge to play has therapeutic benefits and the role of adults is to support children's play rather than direct it. This child-led or play-led approach to play has remained at the center of Pete's professional practice and teaching in the master's degree in developmental and therapeutic play course at Swansea University. Pete became aware of the basic principles of TA when completing a therapeutic playwork course in 2004, which led him to develop a theoretical model of play interaction between the child, or children, and the adult (playworker) supporting children's play. He has published in various journals and contributed to the latest edition of Moyles (2014) *The Excellence of Play on Early Years Practitioners and the Role of Play*. Pete's most recent publication is a coauthored book with Shelly Newstead in 2017 entitled *Researching Play from a Playwork Perspective*. Pete can be reached at the College of Human and Health Science, Department of Policy, Health and Social Studies, Singleton Park, Swansea University, Wales SA2 8PP; email: p.f.king@swansea.ac.uk.

Susannah Temple, PhD, Provisional Teaching Transactional Analysis (education), worked in various educational contexts throughout her life as a teacher, dancer, community worker, facilitator, counselor, psychotherapist, and university lecturer. Susannah became a TA psychotherapist and educational Certified Transactional Analyst in the early 1990s, then taught TA in university master's programs for educational psychologists and educators from a variety of contexts for over a decade. Susannah's research (1997-2002) to validate her functional fluency model and

create the Temple Index of Functional Fluency (TIFF©) won her an European Association for Transactional Analysis Silver Medal in 2003. In 2014, the ITAA presented her with the Eric Berne Memorial Award for functional fluency as "an original and highly significant theoretical and practical contribution to the field of transactional Analysis." At present, Susannah is semiretired and works to support TIFF providers and others in their endeavors to increase the kinds of communication and relationships that bring mutual benefit to all concerned. Susannah can be reached at [PROVIDE POSTAL ADDRESS]; email: susannahtemple@googlemail.com; website: www.functionalfluency.com and www.functionalfluency.co.uk.

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