

Sensing

OUR DOORWAYS TO PERCEPTION

The world is full of magic things, patiently waiting for our senses to grow sharper.

~W.B. Yeats

Lara's violet

Lara is exactly two years old. Her mother has handed her a violet - the first one Lara's seen. She holds the flower gently because she already knows something this small and delicate could easily crush. Lara discovered roses a little while back, finding out for herself that some flowers with beautiful colour and perfume also have thorns. Quick to see there are no thorns on this tiny flower, she brings it up to her nose, inhaling the scent of violets for the first time.

While Lara explores the softness of the tiny petals, she hears her mother telling her the name of the flower. When her mother says this particular violet is okay to eat, Lara looks up warily, checking she has heard correctly - it doesn't look like any food she knows. She has learned not to put *everything* straight into her mouth as that doesn't always go too well. Reassured by her mother, Lara tastes the violet. There isn't much flavour - and it's a bit chewy - but now Lara wonders what other flowers might be okay to eat.

Lara has had a few moments of using all her physical senses, adding to her knowledge and experience. She now knows more than she did before those moments took place and has filled in some details of how she perceives the world.

Understanding our world

Learning - coming to an understanding of the world we live in, of the people around us and of ourselves - begins with our senses. Our instinct is there as a natural force, inbuilt. Our intuition is an unconscious force, our sixth sense, present at birth. Our five physical senses are the channels through which we discover how the physical world works. Throughout life, right from babyhood, we learn from and through our senses; we learn what colours we like, what music pleases us. We learn to recognise the voices of people we know and love, how good a hug feels, what perfumes and odours appeal

to us - or clearly do not - and what food we enjoy eating.

Our senses are the doorways to perception, our points of contact with the world, from which we construct our own interpretation of reality.

The five traditionally recognised senses are sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch. The word 'touch' doesn't begin to do justice to the variety of sensations our bodies are capable of experiencing, so instead of touch, we use the term '**kinaesthetic**'.

Kinaesthetic encompasses:

- Sensations connected with our skin, e.g.
 - o texture
 - o smoothness or roughness
 - o movement
 - o the feel of the clothes we wear, our shoes, glasses resting on our face
 - o itches
 - o the air temperature against our skin
 - o moisture or dryness
 - o the weight of our limbs or eyelids
- Internal sensations e.g.
 - o heat or cold
 - o hunger and thirst
 - o tiredness or energy
 - o aches, pain and comfort
 - o breathing, heartbeat etc.
- Muscle movement
- Proprioception - our sense of body position, and the relationship between sensation and movement
- Bodily sensations experienced with emotions, which we cover in *Feeling 37*

Putting it all together

In the context of understanding the relationship between our sensory systems and how we think, the senses are referred to collectively as our Representational Systems.

The collective name tells us a lot. Our physical senses give us a representation, or impression, of the world around us. How the world looks, sounds and feels is individual to each of us. We can agree on some generalities, but for all of us there will be fine distinctions at odds with the perceptions of others. We discuss these distinctions and why they're important in *Representational Systems 86*.

Our sensory experience is influenced by many things,

including our thoughts at the time, our emotional state, the clarity of our sight and hearing, and even our heat or cold tolerance. Have you ever had the experience of commenting that it's hot (or cold), only to get blank stares, or be challenged that no, it's not? We don't even have the exact same perception of temperature.

Different people witnessing the same event will often give widely diverse accounts of what took place; perhaps you've noticed this and wondered why. It all comes down to perception. Those senses to which we habitually pay the most attention will provide us with the most information, thus shaping how we perceive and recall an event.

Some people will be primarily aware of what they see, others more aware of the sounds they hear and words spoken, while others still will be highly aware of the feelings they have about what's happening, or notice particular smells and tastes.

When we consider the complexity of how our senses work - for instance vision, where the images we see are turned upside down, coded, reassembled and then projected in such a way that they appear outside of ourselves - it's a wonder when two people *can* agree on the same external event. Add to this the variations in how we each process sensory information, and we surely have to marvel that we communicate with each other as well as we do.

Beryl's sense of colour

After her car was backed into, Beryl arranged for some panel and paint work to repair the damage. When she collected her car, she noticed the new paint colour did not match the old. She now had a two-tone car, which did not satisfy her eye for visual detail. The painter expressed surprise - he thought it looked fine; however, he wanted a happy customer and re-did the paint.

While the second attempt brought improvement, to Beryl's eye the colour still didn't match and she politely insisted the painter get it right. After the third repaint, the match, while not perfect, was close enough that Beryl decided she could live with it. She and the painter saw it differently. To Beryl the colours were different tones and the painter saw a fair match. They were each looking through different eyes.

Our unique perception of reality

In the same ways, we can have widely varying perceptions and preferences when it comes to artwork, music, how soft or how hard we like the bed, aromas and the types of food we

enjoy. What we each call reality is actually our very own individual, tailor-made unique representation of what constitutes *our* reality. It is our perception and ours alone. Just like fingerprints, no two representations are identical. (See also 'Our story is our perception of reality' 61 in *Presuppositions*.)

How do we develop our perceptions?

Along the way of our growing up, many of us tend to prefer one or two senses in relating to our world. If perhaps we had our childhood drawings praised, we may turn our attention to the visual sense. If our singing brought us much praise and good feeling, perhaps we became more aware of sounds and voice. These preferences will also affect the ways we find learning easiest - we may learn best by seeing how something is done, reading about it or hearing descriptions and instructions, or physically doing the new learning.

Developing our senses

Many of us have habitually gone through our days without fully switching on our senses. Much of this book involves developing our sensory awareness to receive a wider range of information. We can then enjoy a deeper understanding of our world and each other, better communication, and more joy and pleasure in day to day living. Embracing the fullness of using all our senses can enhance our experience and enrich every aspect of our lives.

Try it now

Take a few moments to look around you, to really see. Notice colours, light and shadow, shapes, distance. Switch on your amazing eyes.

The real voyage of discovery does not consist of new landscapes, but in having new eyes.

~ Marcel Proust

Listen - what do you notice? Even in a quiet room, we can hear sounds, maybe from outside - traffic, trees in a breeze, birds? Or inside sounds from a fridge running, a clock ticking. You are breathing - can you hear that?

The quieter you become, the more you can hear.

~ Ram Dass

What can you feel right now? Is there a sense of temperature, or movement of air on your skin? Is there a spot of tension in

your neck or shoulder? Tingling in a toe? Notice the feeling of the clothing on your skin and the movement of that clothing as you breathe. What scents or perfumes can you smell? Is there any taste or sensation in your mouth?

Face numbed with fragrant morning air

Sea breezes raking through my hair

The taste of salt, the wet of dew

A winter walk when day is new

~ From a poem by Evelyn