In Touch: Exploring Touch, Tactility and Deafblindness

Deafblind UK Online Conference 2026

Session title: Establishing a Tactile Ecosystem - Is it Time for a Tactile Revolution?

Speaker: Steve Rose M.Sc.

Date: Thursday, 8th October 2026

Time: 11:15 - 11:55 BST (21:15 - 21:55 AEST)

Overview:

Touch has been treated as a secondary compensatory sense—a last resort—for too long. Designed to be felt, this session positions the tactile ecosystem as a clinical and educational priority. Drawing from experience supporting children born with deafblindness in developing tactile language and cognition, it integrates reflections on active exploration, environmental mapping, and embodied communication to describe a tactile-primary system for language, literacy, and human connection.

Using tactile self-reflection activities, participants will explore how tactile strategies seek information, location, and connection. The session reframes tactile selectiveness and aversion not as compliance issues, but as active communicative expressions, emphasising the practitioner's role in providing positive tactile mediation and interaction.

This presentation invites participants to reflect on whether to welcome or question the role of technology in moderating human connection. Should we instead seek a tactile revolution—one where educators, therapists, and interventionists promote tactile interaction before resorting to alternatives?

The session concludes by focusing on three calls to action: recognising the breadth of tactile literacy as an active cognitive process, promoting the tactile modality as linguistically robust, and addressing the implementation gap to ensure tactile evaluation tools are embraced by practitioners and families.

Touch is not a last resort. What will you do to fuel the tactile revolution?

About the speaker

Steve Rose (MSc.) is a speech pathologist, deafblind consultant, advocate and ally, with experience supporting people with deafblindness, or complex disabilities. Based in Melbourne, Australia, he provides person-centred therapy and specialised training using remote and in-person supports. His interests focus on early intervention, use of video analysis and development of bodily-tactile communication, tactile language and tactile cognition.

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Session summary

This session argued that touch has been treated as a secondary, compensatory sense for too long, and that the tactile ecosystem deserves to be treated as a clinical and educational priority in its own right.

It was delivered without slides. Participants took part in short practical activities: exploring a small object through systematic exploratory procedures, and locating an object in space without using vision. Those activities illustrated three things that tactile strategies seek. Information. Location. Connection.

Tactile literacy

Exploratory procedures are the systematic movements we use to find out about objects through touch. Holding, enclosing, pressing, rubbing, tracing a contour and passing an object between hands each yield a different property. Used deliberately, they build a haptic map. Learning to use them systematically is tactile literacy, and it is an active cognitive process rather than a compensation for something missing.

Functional equivalence

A visual glance and a tactile trace reach the same cognitive outcome by different routes. The tactile route takes longer, and it offers more: the texture of surfaces, their stability, and exact distance in real space. The sensory channel differs. The cognitive milestone is identical.

Aversion and selectiveness as communication

Tactile aversion and selectiveness are commonly reported as barriers. They are better understood as self-protective assertions of autonomy, particularly where a person's hands are routinely placed into experiences at someone else's pace. Hand-under-hand mediation, alongside active learning approaches, leaves control with the person who is exploring and reduces the reinforcement of aversion.

From perception to expression

Early expressions from children born with deafblindness grow out of their tactile experiences. A sign may be produced as it was felt rather than as it looks, with shape, direction or location flipped. To see such a sign it is different. To feel it, it is the same. These are meaningful expressive forms, not errors.

Tactile working memory

Tactile perception is sequential where vision is parallel, so tactile working memory carries more of the load. The Tactile Working Memory Scale describes three constructs: encode, maintain and manipulate. All three are observable in ordinary tactile exploration, and all three were used by participants during the practical activities.

Bodily-tactile communication and tactile sign language framework

Bodily-tactile communication and tactile sign language are linguistically robust, they can be tracked and put in the context of development. This means that **individual expressions**, are acknowledged and supported in development. It gives credit to the **communicative potential** of children born with deafblindness.

Robust tactile assessment

The tools already exist. and they deserve to be assessed on their own terms rather than through visually biased methods. Testing tactile learners with visually loaded tools is Distantism operating inside clinical practice, not as an attitude but as a method.

Calls to action

Call 1: Recognise the breadth of tactile literacy.

We must validate tactile exploration as a primary, sophisticated way of knowing. It is an active cognitive process, not a compensation for something missing.

Call 2: Promote the tactile modality as linguistically robust.

Bodily-tactile communication and tactile sign language stand up to the robust language challenge. Supported by multiple case studies. Yet they remain out of scope in most decisions about robust language. That has to change.

Call 3. Close the implementation gap.

We have the tools. The question is adoption? We need to translate knowledge in academia into practical application in practice: in early intervention, in education, and the wider community. It is time to systematise training, so that families and practitioners actively adopt tactile mediation and haptic communication.

Adoption includes technology, but developers must not force technical compliance that they think works into the hands of those who know what works.

Tools and resources

A framework for learners developing bodily-tactile communication and tactile sign language skills

A developmental framework supporting communication development in the tactile modality. It plots tactile language skills against development, so that individual expressions are recognised, tracked and credited. By Steve Rose.

Steve Rose's tactile communication framework, with guidance and tracking materials

Tactile Working Memory Scale (TWMS)

An observation scale for identifying bodily-tactile working memory in everyday occurrences and during social interaction. Three constructs: encode, maintain and manipulate. By Jude T. Nicholas, Annika M. Johannessen and Trees van Nunen.

Tactile Working Memory Scale: a professional manual, from the Nordic Welfare Centre

References available on request