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Solutions

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Please address all correspondence to Closing The Gap, P.O. Box 68, Henderson, MN 56044. Telephone 507-248-3294; Fax 507-248-3810. Email <info@closingthegap.com>; Website <www.closingthegap.com>.


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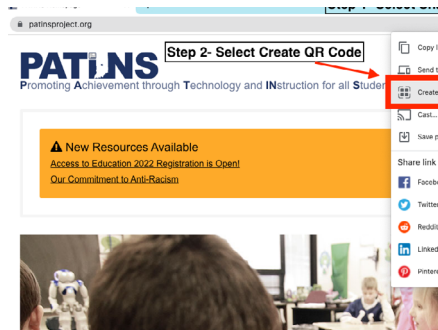
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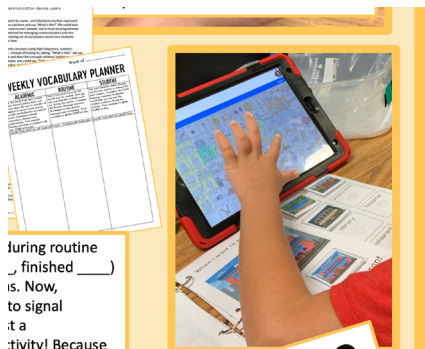
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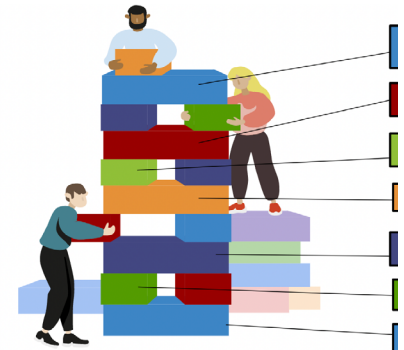
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Collaborating With Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Users Gains A New Perspective To Best Support

Summary:

Learning from a person who uses an Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) device is crucial to best support AAC users. This article goes through different topics from early intervention, literacy, to collaborating with clients. The end goal is to empower our clients to increase their self advocacy skills and gain a new perspective for AAC through an AAC user experience.

BEHAVIOR IS A RESULT OF NOT BEING ABLE TO COMMUNICATE EFFECTUALLY:

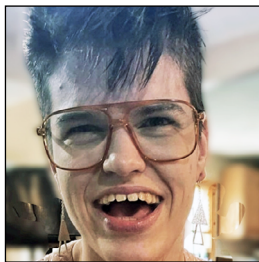
My parents struggled with my communication as an infant. I could not always point or motion for what I wanted because of my physical limitations. I would get frustrated easily. When I was around two years old, I had a gait-trainer walker, and I would pin my parents up against a wall trying to get them to concentrate on me, and how I was sounding out words because I did not have a device. I had a lot to say at a young age.

After I opened Click. Speak. Connect. I came to realize that there are more people who need Alternative and Augmentative Communication (AAC). Because they do not have a way to communicate. I hear about adults who are just getting their first AAC device because the people who are working with them do not believe that they are smart enough. It blows me away because people have no idea what is going on in someone's mind.

THIS IS THE MAIN REASON WHY EARLY INTERVENTION IS SO IMPORTANT!

When I was 3 years old, I started preschool. It was a great experience because I had a wonderful preschool teacher that

could see my potential. She worked hard to help me get my voice out. She told my parents, "This girl has something inside her head, it's called brains!" My preschool teacher worked with me using picture boards which helped with my communication, but it was difficult for me to point. I was limited on the number of pictures I could have on a board in front of me. So she tried a simple device with a switch that Keystone had for the school. Keystone in Iowa is the area education resource for school therapists and teachers to use. The device was similar to a clock type device and I would push the button to stop the arrow on what I wanted to say. This was my first experience with a device. My teacher and my therapists could tell my struggle for communication was beyond just my physical ability to access my communication device and boards. So they started to teach me to read in preschool. The AAC devices that had to be programmed and light-tech boards could not predict what I wanted to talk about, and that would frustrate me. Learning to read was a big breakthrough! I could now read, but that also meant that I could spell. So when I entered kindergarten, I was mainstreamed into the regular classroom and I was a speller. I did not like the picture boards any longer, and I wanted to spell out things that I



LYDIA DAWLEY, I'm from Decorah, Iowa. I'm a graduate from the University of Wisconsin in Whitewater, WI. with my Bachelors of Science in Liberal Studies with special interest in Communication Sciences and Disorders. I'm the Chief Executive Officer and founder of Click. Speak. Connect. I consult with Speech-Language Pathologists, teachers, parents and client in access methods, faster access, device experiences in order to help with learning new apps, language skills related to AAC. Also I mentor other AAC users to work on social skills. We work on self-advocacy skills and social skills with our communication devices. I created an adaptive stylus called NadPen for people with disabilities. Recently I wrote a children's book called "Looking Through My Eyes," it's based off of my life with Cerebral Palsy.

wanted.

One of my biggest pet peeves with AAC devices is the programming. Therapists, teachers and parents trying to predict what the AAC user is wanting to say, no one should predict someone else's responses or thoughts. To me, the programmed AAC devices limited my language to what someone else thought I was capable of communicating. Luckily for me, my parents, teachers, and therapists felt the same way. When I was still in preschool my support group formed to start looking at devices for me.

My first device was called Gemini. I had a key guard and I used a pointer that my occupational therapist from our local hospital made for me. It was a fabricated hand splint with a pointer attached to it for me to use. Because of my athetoid movements that I could not control, my hand would let go of a pointer and I could not control it. So the fabricated one worked better because even if my muscles let go I did not drop it since it was attached to my hand.

COLLABORATING WITH AAC USERS TO DECIDE THEIR AAC DEVICE IS KEY

We as educators need to show them everything, not just our favorite systems or what we think they will be successful at. Honestly our clients might come up with ideas that you would never come up with that makes it work and easier! Not going to lie, my team learned early on that I was the lead decision maker for which AAC device I was getting, and I was pretty clear of what I did not like or what I thought. This might have them wanting them to pull their hair out because I'd tell them the access method they chose would not work or the new system that they picked was not a good fit for me. The reality was only I was going to be using the device day in and day out!! This is why we as educators need to listen to AAC users and let them choose the device because they know what their body can or cannot do.

The AAC user needs to have the final say on what access method they use. I had educators that really wanted to use a head mouse to run my device. I knew it was not going to work because my head control was not good, but I had to try to show them that it would not work. We need to trust our clients to know what they know and what they can or cannot do. AAC users need to know what they can do on their own and what they need help to self advocate for themselves. If we make them just try because we are certain it will work, then we are saying that they do not know what they can or cannot do.

I have a lot of people that tell me that I need a mount for my iPad. I always tell them, "I have something that works for me." I have a Velcro strap that connects on each side of my wheelchair, and it goes through my iPad case, this is what my parents and I created!! I can transfer myself to my wheelchair and out, a mount would limit my ability to do that. And I like to be independent as much as I can! I know that I drove my educators and drive my friends who are therapists crazy because I keep telling them, "no." Sometimes I wish people could see my view! I think other AAC users feel this way too because a lot of times we get told what equipment that we need, and it might help us for one thing, but it's not always practical for everything. People with disabilities know their body better than anyone, so why not ask them about what they need first!

DON'T START WITH A LIMITED AMOUNT OF WORDS TO START WITH

I cringe when people say they select a few words that the user can use because I believe it isn't teaching them how to use the word correctly. I was consulting with someone, and they said that their student had the vocab builder on as the educator wanted the student to use certain words for targeting. Yes I know some AAC users press random words, especially beginners, but that's no reason to remove words! If the student has the word "stop" available, they have no way to tell you they need a break, or they need to go to the bathroom, or something hurts. Also by having a few words available, they can't work on syntax. We might get excited if the AAC user is successful with saying one to three words on their own, but they need to look at all of the words to learn how they work in language. Having too many words might be overwhelming for some AAC users, that's okay. Ask the AAC user if they want less words on the screen. Do not hide words right off the bat, just because you think they won't be successful. Nobody is limiting how many words verbal individuals can use, then it should not be any different for AAC users!

One of my clients is thirteen years old now, but she got a communication device when she was nine, but she was not able to access all of the words until she was eleven. Just imagine how she felt for her first eleven years. She had behaviors that were categorized as aggressive because she would lash out, but those behaviors were caused by the frustration of not being able to communicate. Now she has been using an accent 1400 for two years now, and she gives presentations, is fully mainstream in the general education classroom, and wins awards. I'm so proud of her!!

WRITING GRAMMAR AND AAC GRAMMAR IS TWO SEPARATE WORLDS

Throughout my life, my grammar and spelling skills were not the greatest if I am honest. I think normally my teachers thought it was because I could not talk, and that was a part of it. But to me, my device caused a huge part of my confusion with grammar and spelling. I always had to pay attention to how my device pronounced words or sentences because sometimes it says the word or sentence wrong. I have to spell words wrong or put punctuation in weird places to make my device say the right thing. At a young age, I learned that writing for school and writing on my device is a whole different ball game. I always got so confused when I got my homework back, and there was a ton of corrections because I wrote how I would have written on my device. I knew my teachers would not understand since they did not use a device, but I wish they would have known that I was doing my best to do two different things. When they explained it to me, that made me more confused because I would do it with my device and it did not work, then I would forget when I wrote a story or an essay. If you have a student who is struggling with grammar or spelling because they might be doing what they learned from using their device. My advice is to write down the rules or notes for writing for school, then that way they do not have to remember or separate the two.



AAC USERS HAS A BETTER UNDERSTANDING OF SYNTAX, BUT IT MIGHT NOT SHOW

My biggest challenge while using an AAC device is my brain goes a million MPH faster than what I can type on my device which causes me to type nonsense. For example: I might think to say, "I went to the mall to get my niece a gift," but I typed, "I went to give my niece a gift." This happens to me when I compose longer messages or when I write essays which makes me frustrated because I type in a groove where I type fast, but I reread or speak it, and it sounds like a whole lot of nonsense. I have to go back and delete it or add what I missed. I get so frustrated because I know it is right what I have in my head, but from the outside world, I might sound like I do not know what I'm talking about or how to form sentences. This might happen to other AAC users, we might have a complete sentence in our head, but there might be three or four words on the device. If you have a student who does not form a sentence on their device, ask them if the sentence is different in their head. If they say yes, then be patient with them as they are correcting it or ask them if this ___ is what they mean instead of automatically thinking they need to work on syntax.

LEARNING HOW TO READ LOOKS DIFFERENT FOR AAC USERS

Learning to read was a big breakthrough! Before there were books on iPads or computers, I listened to books on tape and looked at an actual book. This made me learn how words sound. Since I was not able to pronounce the words verbally, I had a hard time sounding it in my head. Listening to the audio tape or someone read to me taught me how to sound out words in my head. When I was in third grade, I got a device that was able to get books scanned onto it. I had a program called Kurzweil 3000 that highlighted the words where it read out loud or I could mute it so that I read it to myself. This helped me because my head control was like a bobble head that I would lose my spot. Also this helped me develop syntax as I can listen or read how sentences should be. I do not know if this will work for everyone because everyone is different, but I do not think having the AAC user type a long book will help them with comprehension and syntax as it is hard to do all of that. I believe having the book in front of them and listening will help them pay attention to words and comprehend what is being read!

AAC USERS NEED TO BE INVOLVED IN CHOOSING THERAPY ACTIVITIES AND COMMUNICATION GOALS

Therapy is the only time that AAC users feel liberated to have conversations because during the school day, AAC users do not have that one-on-one where they can take their time and talk. AAC users need to have that time to be heard because just imagine how it would feel to not be able to have a conversation with someone all day. If therapists are assertive and demanding them to do things, then AAC users can't release the stress of not being heard. I hear a lot that some therapists are assertive and demanding kids to do activities that they don't want to do, and it is not accomplishing anything because the kids are not really learning anything. Kids are smart and they know what they want to achieve. This is a reason why our clients need to choose their own goals. For example, maybe Sally wants to have her friend

join to have a conversation. Right there she is using her device, asking or answering questions, and engaging with her peers. Choosing what we want to do is a human right, it should not be different for AAC users!

HAVE ANOTHER AAC USER JOIN THE SESSION

When I was in school, I was the only one that was mainstreamed at the time. I did not see anyone like me, all day long. It is important to find connections for the AAC user to other AAC users. It is important so they know they are not alone. It is important so they can communicate with someone in the same way and grow their social skills. In my sessions with my clients, I just talk to them about anything that they want, listen to music. If the song is happy, sad, or mad, then we talk about what makes us happy, sad, or mad. Usually when my clients talk about what they get sad or mad about, it is about not having people think that they are not smart or when people don't wait for them to type. Then we discuss what we can do to advocate for ourselves in these situations. This makes them feel like they are not alone.

GET AAC USERS IN THEIR INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN (IEP) MEETINGS

I am a huge advocate for having the AAC user come to their Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings. This year I have started going to my clients' IEP meetings, and I find myself thinking, where is the student? They should be here, it is about them. I know some students might not be interested in what is going on or want to talk about what they need. I strongly believe that in the meeting, the student should tell the team how they feel things are going, what frustrations they have, and what they wish their school day would be like. The AAC user is the one in school dealing with these issues. Then the team needs to listen, and help the AAC user, achieve their goals. If the student is not able to be as engaged intellectually, then the team needs to try things that help include the AAC user, with their peers, and give the AAC user the chance to develop and not put the AAC user in a bubble, labeled, "unable," as I have often seen educators do.

My parents requested that I attend all my IEP meetings and any meetings that involved my AAC device. My parents felt that I needed to have a say in these things, and I am so lucky they felt that way. So I could help direct my education and my communication. My support group was made up of current teachers for the year, teachers for the next school year, all three of my therapist-occupational, speech, and physical therapist, my personal aide, the special education coordinator, the Keystone IT person, the district IT person, the principal, a parent support representative from the state, my parents, and myself. Once I had an educator, in my IEP meeting say she thought I could just observe my classes, and not participate in class and have to do the work, and it would make it so much easier. Let me just say, that did not happen. AAC users have strong ideas and opinions from their life experiences, they should not think they have to settle or be pushed out because of people with narrow minded views.

IT'S OKAY FOR THE AAC USERS TO BE IN CHARGE OF THEIR AAC DEVICE

I hear educators and caregivers get annoyed because they have to fix what the AAC user did, and I tell them that it is abso-



lutely necessary to have them play with their device which leads them being independent. They will know where everything is or fix a problem without being stuck and waiting for someone to fix it. It is absolutely amazing to see my clients switch their voice to have an Australian accent because they think it is hilarious, and they have control of their voice.

As you may have caught on by now, I have always been a rebel which might have driven my educators and therapists crazy because I would find a way to switch my vocabulary, program or delete buttons, and change the settings on my device. I can hear one of my educators, not my speech therapist, tell me to stop deleting my phrases and changing the settings, and say, "I was ruining my device." Did that make me quit and obey her rules? Nope! So my parents requested in my IEP meeting that I be in charge of my device, decide what is to be deleted off my device, and be allowed to be trained to program my device myself. From that point on, I was in charge of what was put on my device.

IT IS OKAY IF AAC USERS USE THEIR AAC DEVICE HOW THEY WANT TO

It is very crucial to recognize that AAC users might not use their communication device like the way that we think they should use it. I had a consultation with a Speech- Language Pathologist, I got asked if she needed to work with her client to use the symbol buttons more because the client uses the keyboard more. Before this I met with her client. Truthfully I did not notice that he was using the keyboard instead of the buttons, so initially my answer was no. Yes the symbol buttons are faster to say what you want to, but sometimes they are not practical. I have to admit that I sometimes type words on the keyboard that I know are in LAMP Words For Life because my body knows how to hit the keys on the keyboard without making too many mistakes. Also when I use the symbol buttons, there's a 70% chance that I will hit the wrong button, then go back and try again. No matter how long or what method they are communicating, and that is what matters.

BY DOING ALL OF THESE THINGS WILL TEACH SELF ADVOCACY SKILLS

By teaching our clients that they can tell us what they think or tell us they do not want to do increase their self advocacy skills as they will realize that their voice matters. Self advocacy does not go away as they get older, it increases as they get. I know this because I had to self advocate in college to allow me to have extra time for my exams and so much more, and even now I have to self advocate for everything that I need.

WHAT I WANT YOU TO TAKE AWAY FROM THIS ARTICLE

Nobody knows what is in someone's brain or heart, so give them a chance and you will be surprised!!!



Designing Professional Development to Reach All Learners

Summary:

The desire for life-long learning and skill refinement exists amongst millions of people across the world. With a variety of unique individuals seeking new information, presenters must be armed with the knowledge of how to create universally accessible and inclusive synchronous and asynchronous professional development opportunities for anyone. In this article, presenters will be asked to reflect upon their current design processes before being led through guiding questions and practical strategies for improving the universal design of any presentation.

INTRODUCTION

Professional development (PD) comes in varying shapes and sizes. It ranges from self-guided online modules to in-person conference sessions to direct coaching, with the goal of supporting lifelong learning for educators, families, caregivers, businesspeople, and anyone seeking new skill sets or adding to their metaphorical toolbox of knowledge. Due to the vast scope of those seeking and impacted by professional development, it is critical to design all PD opportunities through the lens of Universal Design for Learning (UDL). This means that all content and its presentation must be proactively designed with universal access in mind.

Considering universally designed content and presentation formats, take a moment to reflect on whether you have ever been on the receiving end of inaccessible information. For example, maybe an article was shared as a PDF in an online module, but the text was copied so poorly that the lines of text were uneven and blurry making it hard to read visually and unable to be read aloud by a text or screen reader [see Figure 1]. You are now left frustrated with the lack of access and may find it necessary to use your personal time to search for the information in an accessible format.

Figure 1 - Uneven lines of text and blurry words in poorly scanned PDF.

Creating Accessible Digital Content: Everyone Deserves Equitable Access

Introduction

The World Wide Web is a powerful educational tool, harnessed by educational administrators, schools, and districts around the world. Students and their families are directed to information on school and district websites, to digital assignments shared through Learning Management Systems (LMS), to websites for research, and so on. While the web was created by Tim Berners-Lee in 1989-90 to empower everyone as noted by him, "The power of the web is in its universality. Access by everyone regardless of disability is an essential aspect," too many individuals, especially those with disabilities, encounter regular gaps in their ability to equitably access the information they need and the instruction required by educators. These gaps include issues such as, but not limited to, text that cannot be manipulated or read aloud by a text or screen reader, missing or inconsistent captions in a video, a lack in contrast of text on a mobile device in the bright sun, and inconsistent keyboard access to a website for a user that cannot navigate a mouse.

Considering that 20% of the population in the United States has a disability, content creators including educators must do a better job of providing equitable access to digital content. This will allow them to, not only increase the reach of their content, but to ensure a place where all students and content consumers belong. The potential of the web to empower all individuals should never be lost due to lack of access.

The Law

Creating accessible content benefits everyone. Plus, students with print disabilities have the right to equitable access to the same instructional materials as their typical peers in a timely manner according to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (20 U.S.C. § 1412 (2004)). This means that retrofitting content to be accessible after it has already been shared with all students, will create a time barrier to your content for students in need of accessible design.

Students with disabilities are also protected from discrimination and guaranteed equal opportunities to participate in the services, programs, and activities offered by



JENA FAHLBUSH, Since 2015 Jena Fahlbush has served as a Specialist for the PATINS Project, a state education agency supporting Indiana's public schools in creating and sustaining an equitable learning environment for every student. She currently serves the project as a specialist in intensive interventions, autism, accessible content authoring, and PC/Microsoft & web accessibility. She holds a Bachelor's in Elementary Education, a Master's in Exceptional Student Education, and is an adjunct instructor at IU Kokomo. Jena is particularly passionate about the whole student experience. This includes how student success can be supported through universal design for learning, assistive technology, and accessible educational materials.

On the flip side of this reflection, maybe you are the instructor of the PD. If you were to rate yourself on a scale of one to four, one being lack of intentional accessible design in your presentation to four being all effort was made to make your information and presentation as universally accessible as possible based upon your knowledge, where would you fall? Make a note of your self-rating now and then again after you read this article or after your next presentation to get a sense of where you find room for improvement.

WHY DOES ACCESSIBILITY MATTER?

To dive more deeply into the why behind accessibility, let's take the former example of inaccessible content a bit further. Imagine yourself engaging in a PD opportunity in which each participant was asked to take a written pre-assessment of their content knowledge. Before being handed the document, you think, "This is great. I am going to be able to qualify what I have learned between the beginning and end of this PD session." However, when the pre-assessment is passed out, you find the assessment is written in a language you do not know; it is written entirely in German (the native language of the speaker). Despite thinking this must be a mistake, the presenter continues and everyone, no matter their language skills, has to complete this pretest with visual decoding and comprehension and without the aid of technology. What are you thinking now?

It is likely easy to imagine the panic, anxiety, and difficulty that many participants who are not German learners might experience at this moment. They may have a solid foundation of content knowledge to share but now are restricted due to the language barrier. This unnecessary barrier will presumably leave the participants feeling cheated, confused, and disengaged with the rest of the presentation.

The latter exemplifies the one size fits all strategy that is too often utilized during professional development as a means to teach to "the middle." This strategy ignores the unique capabilities and qualities of each participant in exchange for teaching to the collective average, but does the "average" group of participants even exist?

According to Todd Rose, former Harvard professor and current Boston-based think tank co-founder and president, "Average is a myth and when we design for the average, we destroy talent" (TEDx Talks, 1993). It is easy to see how talent was destroyed in the previous example simply because participants were not given an equitable chance to share the knowledge they were bringing to their PD session. Instead, they were completely denied the opportunity to participate and made to feel excluded.

If you are thinking that you would never want to create unnecessary barriers for your participants, then let us hypothetically investigate what qualities your participants may bring to the table.

WHO ARE THE ATTENDEES OF YOUR PD ANYWAY?

Ensuring that participants can meet the learner objectives is the goal for professional development, but because it is nearly impossible to know all of your first-time attendees as well as you might like, it is necessary to ponder who may come through the door and into your training. Try envisioning them by asking yourself the following questions:

1. Do they have 20/20 vision with or without glasses?
 - a. Will they have access to their glasses?
2. Do they have average hearing with or without a hearing aid?
 - a. Will they have access to their hearing devices?
3. Can they see all colors?
4. Are they sensitive to activated electronics?
5. Do they require physical access accommodations for participation?
6. Do they use:
 - a. A white cane
 - b. Crutches
 - c. A wheelchair
 - d. A walker
 - e. Other mobility technology
7. In which modalities do they best receive and retain information?

This list covers only a small portion of considerations that need to be made when planning and designing a universal PD session. Yet, you may have never reflected upon this set of your participants' characteristics and qualities before now.

FACE-TO-FACE ENVIRONMENT

To create universally designed professional development in a face-to-face setting, it is essential to begin with environmental considerations. Consider the five senses—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touches and how you can universally design your space to meet the sensory needs and preferences of all your participants.

Let's begin by considering the sense of sight in your environment by reflecting on the following guiding questions:

1. Can the lighting be adjusted to ensure your digitally projected slides and/or handout information can be easily seen from around the room?
 - a. If lighting cannot be changed, provide digital or printed copies for accessible personal viewing.
2. Are there tables and chairs close enough to the front of the room to allow for preferred seating due to visual access needs or preferences?
3. Can someone using a wheelchair, cane, walker, crutches, or other mobility technology freely move about, engage, and interact in your space?
4. Have you ensured your slides and/or handouts were created accessibly?



- a. Is your text typed or printed with colors that use solid contrast?
 - b. Is your font or print easy to read?
 - c. Have you given your charts, graphs, and other items that may be color-coded a second indicator of meaning? For example, a line graph may be color coded, but because color is not accessible to all participants, repeated shapes should be added to the lines for equitable visual access. If you'd like more specific information on universally accessible presentation materials, please refer to my previous Closing the Gap article titled, "[Creating Accessible Digital Content: Everyone Deserves Equitable Access.](#)"
5. Have you uploaded accessible versions of your presentation and/or handout to any required locations? Consider printing a few hard copies of your resources for anyone needing a printed version.
 6. If professional captions have not been requested, what will you use to provide automatic captions for visual access to your spoken content? Automatic captions can be turned on and projected via Google Slides, Microsoft PowerPoint, Zoom, Google Meet, etc. Alternatively, if you are not projecting anything, you could start a conversation using Microsoft Translator on your phone or device and share information with your attendees about how to join the conversation in the language of their choice. This would provide visual access to captions while providing translation options as well.

Now, turn your attention to the sounds in the environment and consider the following guiding questions:

1. Will a microphone be present in your room? If the answer is yes, this is wonderful. You should always use the microphone you are given unless you bring one of your own. Please note that this is a critical guideline. This is not about whether you can properly project your voice for everyone in the room; this is about equitable auditory access to your information. Without a microphone, you are removing universal access to the content you worked so hard on to create and present.
2. Are you using other electronic devices, or will other electronics be present in the room? If so, power down any unnecessary devices. These may include secondary computers, microphones, and other electronics to avoid feedback or other electronic sounds that could be physically distracting.
3. Are you providing digital copies of your materials? When it comes to sharing digital materials, it is essential to ensure that your slides and handouts have been made as accessible as possible. This means that they can be equitably accessed visually, auditorily, and tactilely. In other words, your participants reading the content through a

refreshable braille display glean the same information from your materials as those that are reading it with their eyes and those that are reading it with their ears via a screen or text reader.

Moving on into the remaining sensory areas– smell, taste, and touch in our environment. These parts of the sensory system may not have been given much thought during the design of your presentation, but there are some guiding questions to reflect upon:

1. Do you plan to use any type of scented markers during your presentation? If so, simply recapping them between uses can eliminate or diminish harsh smells in your space.
2. Will you offer any type of snack or treat for your participants? Remember, it's important to be mindful of food allergies and to avoid foods commonly associated with allergic reactions, such as peanuts.
3. Are you making fidget items available to support engagement amongst those that need more sensory input during learning? The use of pipe cleaners or other inexpensive fidgets from your local dollar store can offer your attendees just what they need to remain regulated in their sensory system and tuned in to your instruction.

VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS

If you find yourself presenting your content in a virtual space, it is still essential to apply what you have learned about the face-to-face environment to digital accessibility in a virtual environment. Remember to check out, "[Creating Accessible Digital Content: Everyone Deserves Equitable Access](#)" for more detailed information on creating accessible digital information.

Additionally, it is best to test your microphone output before your session begins to ensure equitable auditory access. Many computers allow you to momentarily record your mic audio to test the quality of the sound. Consider having a secondary mic cued up as an alternate for any primary microphone issues.

Because virtual PD usually allows for pre-registration, ask your registrants if any accommodations are needed and give them a text field to explain their needs. Turn on automatic captions or ensure that the session is professionally captioned if any attendees have requested formal caption accommodations.

Test your appearance on camera before your event. This provides a universal visual experience for your virtual attendees while also supporting access to lip-reading for attendees who may be deaf or hard of hearing. Keep your background simple. Virtual backgrounds can be enticing, but they often lack consistent effects causing distraction or missed verbal elements. Ensure proper lighting for being on camera, so that the attendees can easily see your face.

Be mindful of any ambient noise in your environment that could cause any disruptions in your audio. Power down any unused electronics during your presentation. This includes any voice-activated devices that may be accidentally prompted to



Charlie's Auditory Comprehension

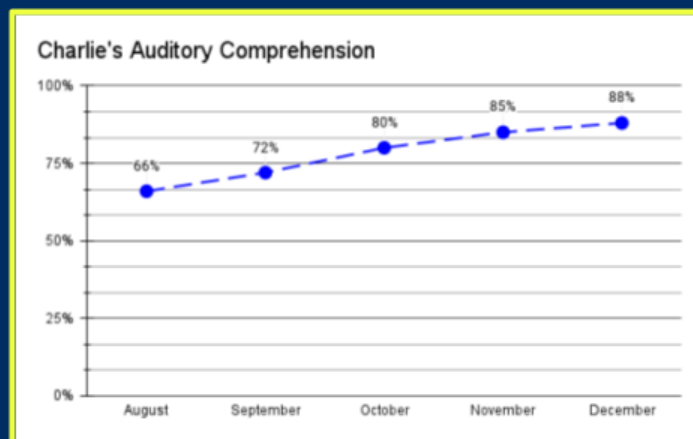


Figure 2 - Presentation slide with the title, Charlie's Auditory Comprehension, on the left and a line chart indicating Charlie's increase in auditory comprehension month-to-month between August and December on the right.

respond to you during your presentation. Practice presenting virtually before your live or recorded session to support a moderate rate of your clearest speech. Consider recording yourself for a snippet of the presentation so that you can review the recording and listen for any spoken or ambient elements that may be distracting for your viewers.

FACE-TO-FACE PRESENTATION

Now that you have intentionally designed your environment for equitable access, you are better prepared to create a universally designed presentation experience for your PD attendees. This begins with your presentation materials. Cue up all your digital materials to have them ready for optimal sharing.

When you are ready to begin speaking, introduce yourself and include a concise description of your appearance. This may sound like, "My name is Jena Fahlbush. I am a white woman in my late thirties with long red hair. I am wearing a black dress and a jean jacket. My pronouns are she/her." Continue to state your name before speaking each time if you are presenting as part of a panel or group.

When an attendee has requested an interpreter, it is necessary to wait until this person is ready before beginning your presentation. Remember that anything you say to the group before the interpreter is ready is likely to be missed by attendees who are deaf or hard of hearing. Furthermore, while captions were mentioned as part of your environmental accessibility, you will want to double-check that your automatic captions are working or that the professional captioning service is in place before you begin your presentation.

Remember to face your audience while you are speaking and

moderate your rate of speech. Additionally, as you are projecting any digital content, allow your attendees enough time to review the information for equitable visual and auditory access. This means that anyone in your audience that may be engaging through an interpreter or lip-reading has the time to visually review the digital content in addition to receiving the spoken information before you move on to new information.

As you discuss any graphics, charts, tables, maps, etc. in your digital content, use descriptive language to illustrate, not only the physical location of the graphic being projected, but the meaning you would expect your attendees with visual access to gather from the image. For example, describing the line chart in Figure 2 could sound like, "On the right-hand side of the screen, the line chart indicates that Charlie's auditory comprehension steadily increased with a text reader between August and December. He began at 66% comprehension in August and ended at 88% comprehension in December; an increase of 22%."

If you choose to highlight any projected graphic or information with a laser or other pointer, point directly at the item and avoid circling or wiggling the pointer. Furthermore, remember that when annotating digital elements or working on a whiteboard, color alone should not be used to convey meaning. Make sure to use strong font color to background contrast and to use at least two indicators of meaning if coding information by color. This could look like adding a repeated pattern to a bar graph in addition to color coding.

Should you be sharing numerous resource URLs that you would like your attendees to view during your presentation, consider copying them onto multiple slides for repetition. This could include a shortened link to your slideshow, for instance.

You could also list all of the important URLs on one shared document or print a few hard copies to have ready for hands-on access. It is important to note that sharing long URLs to websites or resources is considered inaccessible. Instead, you'll want to refer to the information in "Creating Accessible Digital Content: Everyone Deserves Equitable Access" on accessible hyperlinks or shortened URLs.

QR codes could also be added to your digital or printed resources as another means of accessing your digital resources. These can freely be created using sites like QRgenerator.com or by clicking on the share icon in the Chrome browser and selecting QR code from the dropdown as shown in Figure 3.

To support attendee engagement throughout your entire presentation, especially if it is more than one hour, build in movement, mindful moments, or brain breaks. These types of strategies can support recall and application beyond your presentation.

Engagement can also be intentionally increased by giving attendees multiple opportunities to respond (OTR) throughout your time together. These can include yes or no questions where your audience can use head nods and shakes, thumbs up/down, or standing up/sitting down. After giving your audience an OTR, summarize the results of the response. This may sound like, "Approximately one third of the audience disagreed with the statement."

Consider setting up back channels like Padlet or Yo Teach to support conversation before, during, and beyond your session. This provides your audience an opportunity to share what they want to learn in your session, to ask questions anonymously or publicly, and to reach back out to you for a set amount of time should a question or need arise after your session. During times in which you take attendee questions, please provide a microphone for the person or repeat the question if a microphone was not available, so that all attendees have an equal opportunity to hear the question.

VIRTUAL PRESENTATION

Universal virtual presentation guidelines mimic those of the face-to-face guidelines with a few exceptions and additions. Because it cannot be said enough, remember that interpreters and captions must be in place before you begin speaking. It is also critical to introduce yourself and to continually announce your name each time you speak, especially when speaking as part of a group. Though the sound of your voice may seem obvious and unique to you, your attendees may not be able to distinguish your voice from another speaker. Ensure your video is turned on with a plain background during your presentation so that attendees can see you speak.

Because you cannot provide hard copies of handouts, have digital resources ready to be shared via shortened links and/or

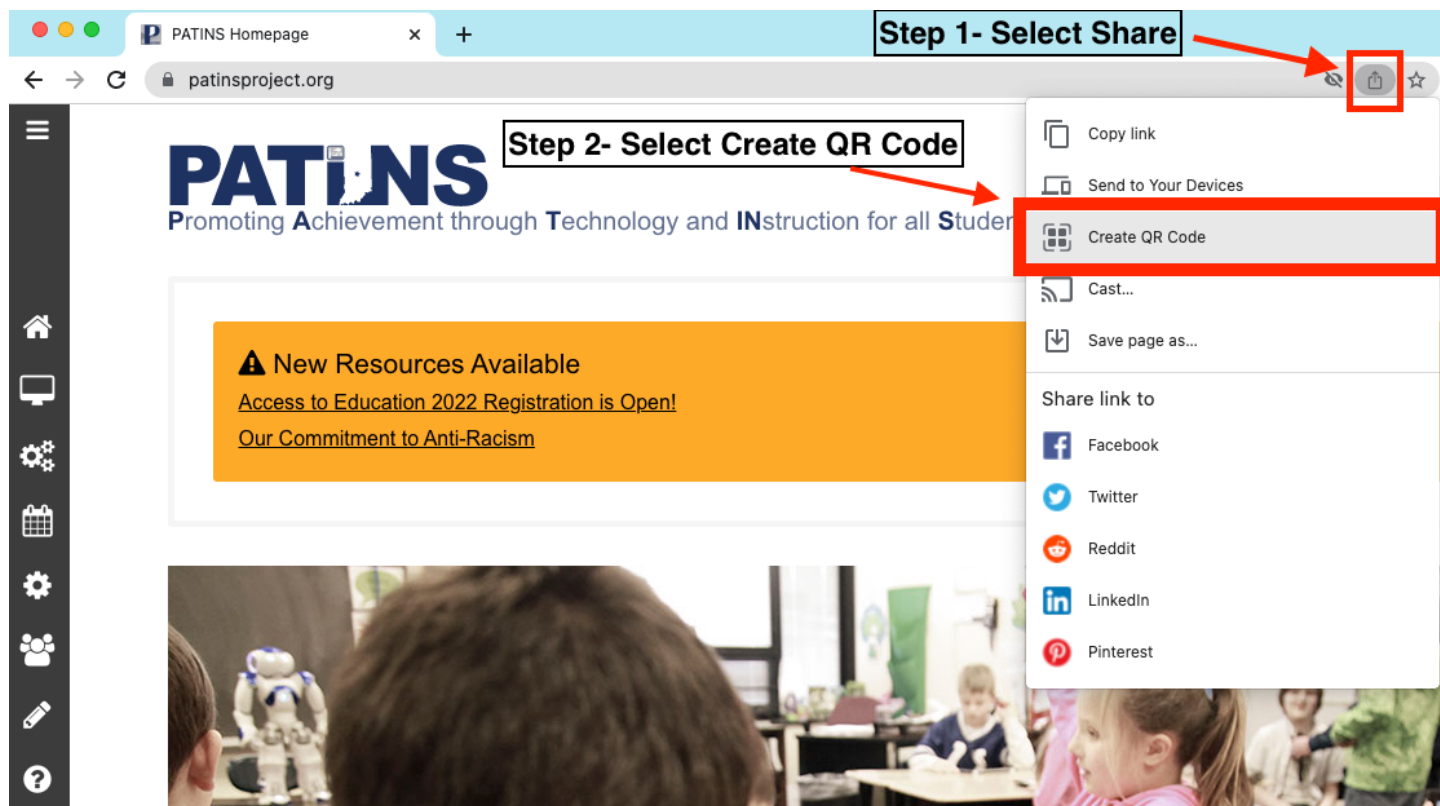


Figure 3 - Screen shot of open Chrome browser with one arrow indicating the location of the share button in the URL bar with the words, Step 1- Select Share and a second arrow indicating the Create QR Code button from the dropdown menu with the words, Step 2- Select QR Code.

QR codes. Engage with your audience and continue to offer multiple opportunities to respond via the chat or nonverbal feedback features of the meeting tool you are using. If possible, ask a friend or colleague to help you monitor the chat, so that you do not miss any questions or opportunities to speak directly to your attendees. Repeating the question before sharing a response is just as important in a virtual setting as it is in a face-to-face setting.

FINAL THOUGHTS

You have the power to design the most universally accessible and inclusive presentation that your participants have ever attended. In doing so, your attendees will presumably be more engaged from beginning to end and able to recall and apply the information that you have shared with them. Your passion for your content will shine through the strategies and protocols that you intentionally infused throughout your presentation for the benefit of the attendees' engagement and comprehension.

REFERENCES

(Video) TEDx Talks. (19 June 1993). The Myth of Average: Todd Rose at TEDxSonomaCounty (Video). YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4eBmyttcfU4> ■



UPCOMING LIVE WEBINARS



Comprehensive Literacy and AAC Users: Building Schema, Vocabulary and Knowledge for CROWD in the CAR Action: With a Bit of STEAM on the Side!

By Sharon Redmon

Thursday, December 8, 2022

4:00 pm – 5:30 pm (Central Standard Time)

Comprehensive Literacy approach in action. We have all read or heard of the ground breaking book, Comprehensive Literacy for All, by David Koppenhaver and Karen A. Erickson, which is now my Go-To for teaching literacy to students with complex bodies and complex communication needs. Putting it into practice can be challenging; however, there are a few tools that can make it less daunting.

In this fast-paced webinar, participants will begin by building their own schema on interactive and engaging ways to teach reading and writing to their students with complex needs. We will begin by developing our student's vocabulary through engaging in interactive STEAM activities anchored to authentic text, which sets the foundation for our students to actively participate in Interactive and Shared reading lessons. Journey with us while we use a few tools; Readtopia, Youtube, The Expanding Expression Tool (Descriptive teaching techniques), and Canva to produce readers, writers, and actors. Oh, yes! Oh, yes, Actors! as the culmination of our hard work, shinned brightly on the stage in our rendition of "The Wizard of OZ."



Promoting Student Agency and Expert Learning with Technology

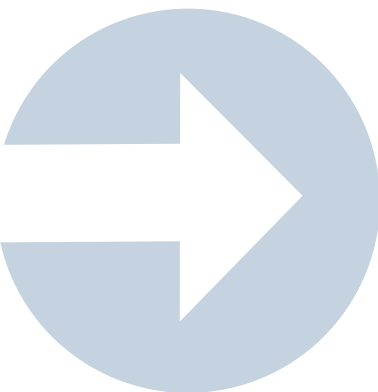
By Janet Peters

Tuesday, January 17, 2023

3:30 pm – 5:00 pm (Central Standard Time)

What is student agency? Student agency relates to students having an active role in their learning through voice and choice, in the process. When students have agency in their learning, the student is making, creating doing, sharing, and collaborating in ways that are meaningful to them. Expert learning as seen through a Universal Design for Learning lens are students that practice agency. They are purposeful and motivated, resourceful and knowledgeable, and strategic and goal-directed. Technology, both assistive technology and universal support technology can scaffold students as they plan, monitor, and reflect on their learning.

This session will discuss how assistive and universal technology in the classroom can help enhance students' engagement, efficacy, and strategic action. We will explore key approaches when introducing universal support tools and assistive technology that promote student agency and develop expert learners. You will leave the session with the knowledge to take action



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Curate: A Framework for Mindful AAC Intervention.

Getting Started, Getting Un-Stuck, and Getting Ready for Change

Summary:

There are so many places to start, so many ideas to implement, and so much technology to learn that we often become overwhelmed and aren't sure why an AAC system isn't working. Curate is a framework for mindfully considering our team, strategies, and goals, curating them into an organized framework, and then cultivating a lifetime of authentic communication. Curate framework conversations are especially helpful when the team gets started, gets stuck, or gets ready for change.

Curate: A framework for mindful intervention for emerging communicators had its beginnings as a mindset shift for my personal life. In the mornings, I have some quiet time with my coffee. I began to realize that considering carefully what I cultivated required that I do LESS things in a better, more intentional way. I had too much growing in my life garden, and the only thing thriving were the weeds, which were all just distractions that didn't produce any fruit. So, I adopted three words: consider, curate, and cultivate. A passage about growing where I was and cleaning out the "briars and thistles" so that the "juniper and myrtle" could grow became my theme.

Soon, those words began to spill over into my work life. My job in my school district is to support teams of families, teachers, teaching assistants, and speech-language pathologists who use assistive technology to communicate. I support them by helping develop classroom plans to grow communication and support individual students using high-tech AAC by evaluating, recommending, and then helping to create an implementation plan across settings. I realized that I was sharing "all the things" with teams, and not many of "the things" were being used. I was offer-

ing too much information, too many goals, too many strategies, too many "you shoulds," and too much technology for anything to take root. There were briars everywhere; all the good stuff was getting lost. Devices were being abandoned. Teams were giving up on alternate communication modes. After transitions, students who were using devices stopped using their devices because their new team had different priorities or mindsets. "It's just not working."

At-home learning because of COVID also shaped the framework. Teachers supported remotely, and parents were trying to help their kids learn from home. Devices started to need updates and get wonky. Parents who supported their kids beautifully couldn't remember how many buttons on the screen and what language system they were using. There had to be a way to organize "all the things" so that we could share ALL the things without sharing them ALL at once, overwhelming a team to the point of paralyzing them, which often lead to device abandonment.

Consider. I began to **consider**. I realized there were three times that teams evaluate and consider AAC devices, strategies, and progress: when getting started with a new device, when prog-



JENNIFER THOMAS, Ed.S, CCC-SLP, is a speech-language pathologist and AAC (augmentative alternative communication) clinical consultant. Jennifer has been an SLP for 23 years and has worked in early intervention, private practice, and school settings in Georgia. Jennifer has worked as an AAC clinical consultant for the last ten years, four of which were as a clinical consultant for an AAC device manufacturer. Currently, she serves as the SLP for the assistive technology team in Houston County School District in Georgia. Jennifer has presented at local, state, and national conferences in the area of AAC and communication for students with significant disabilities. Jennifer's goal is to simplify the process of using and teaching communication, language, and literacy for students with significant disabilities by teaching a 6-component framework that helps teams curate what they do using evidence-based practices. Jennifer lives in middle Georgia with her husband and three daughters.



ress gets “stuck,” and when there is a transition (new classroom, new SLP, graduation). I began to ask, “What’s not working?” and the answer was always, “the device.” Teams couldn’t put their finger on what exactly wasn’t working with the device. “He doesn’t know how to use it” was a frequently heard phrase.

Curate. So, then, I began to **curate**: to carefully select and categorize the components of communication intervention for emerging communicators. I defined emerging communicators as students, clients, or patients that were largely nonspeaking, used primarily actions, gestures, or objects/locations to communicate, or were beginning AAC users. After much consideration, I grouped all the information into six components: Mindset, Message, Mode, Methods, Monitor, and Maintain. I decided to start asking teams which part wasn’t working. With this framework, we could pinpoint exactly where the biggest stumbling block was and work from there. We could talk about each part of the intervention and quickly develop a plan to overcome it.

Cultivate: Then, I realized that the intervention framework had to be **scalable and repeatable** for teachers to buy in...to plant, water, and grow the garden of success. The framework had to be doable with one student using AAC or ten students on different devices. It had to work when a new student moved into the class in the middle of the year. The framework had to be **repeatable**. Teachers didn’t need to reinvent the process each time a new student enrolled in their class or each time a student received a new AAC device. Scalable and repeatable with as little thinking as possible was my goal.

THE SIX COMPONENTS

Mindset is the lens through which we view ourselves, our clients/students/patients, our classrooms, and our interventions. SLPs and teachers develop IEP goals, plan lessons, and create activities based on their mindset. Six values I view myself, my cli-

ents/families and my work through are: All means all, relationship first, backward design, Universal Design for Learning/stretch, message-driven intervention, and grace, celebration, and fun. I evaluate students, develop intervention plans, write goals, create lessons, and choose activities based on these six principles.

For example, I often use photos from home and field trips in sessions focused on commenting. We choose vocabulary to include names, places, and verbs because a long-term goal is for students to retell an event from a different setting for social connection and safety. I’m using playground photos to help prompt them, and maybe we’re just commenting using single words, but the goal is that the student can come back from the playground and tell a story about what happened there. (Backward planning). I create margin in sessions to leave time to follow students’ lead and for unexpected fun play (Relationship First). In a weekly plan with daily activities, we leave time for unplanned classroom hiccups (sick students, tired students, a feeding tube gone awry) and for celebrating what we’ve learned (Grace, celebration, and fun). The best AAC device is the one I can put my hands on immediately in the classroom (which may be made from paper and glue), and we work towards the ideal device while teaching with the one we have (stretch: using what I already have).

Device abandonment happens when the team does not have mindset conversations. Progress stalls when a teacher targets one set of goals but the parents value something different. When the strengths of team members are not identified, sometimes talents go wasted. If one team member loves the technology, let them be in charge of all the software updates, programming, and training. Know who your team is, discuss each member’s strengths and role on the team, and revisit your “why” each time you write a goal or a lesson plan...does it support the big goal of independent communication for your student?

Message: Curate is a message-driven framework. Messages

My mission is to inspire others to achieve their potential by teaching repeatable, scalable steps to achieve authentic communication for all people.

consider.
curate.
cultivate.

I will carefully consider what I choose to cultivate, leaving space for grace and the unexpected.

WWW.JENNIFERTHOMASSLP.COM

Examples of my personal and professional mission statements and values that I developed after completing mindset worksheets.



A FRAMEWORK FOR MINDFUL AAC INTERVENTION

Mindset

Mindset is our lens through which we view ourselves, our roles, our students, our classrooms, and our families. We use these principles and values to make decisions for our students, lessons and goals. "Curate™" is based on the following principles: all means all, relationship first intervention, universal design/stretching, backward planning, message driven intervention, grace, celebration, and fun.

Messages

Curate™ is a message driven framework. Curate focuses on seven messages that are essential throughout the life span. Target vocabulary selection is based on the purpose of the message. Word selection may change throughout the lifespan, but the purpose of communication holds fast. A message driven approach allows for core vocabulary AND highly motivating words and concepts as target word choices.

Mode

Curate™ is a multi-modal communication framework. Curate™ honors all communicative behaviors (gestures, facial expressions, natural speech, actions, and behaviors) while expanding more conventional modes in order to increase communicative independence. Using a multi-modal approach allows teachers to use Curate™ framework with all students and allows all students to communicate with a variety of modes (signs, pictures, gestures, high tech devices).

Methods

Systematically using evidence-based practices (EBP) to teach practical communication ensures growth. Teaching communication partners these EBP is part of Curate™. It includes strategies and tools for developing a team that leads, encourages, and responds to all communication growth. We'll focus on learning ten methods for communication partners to help AAC users become authentic and flexible communicators.

Monitor

Progress monitoring communication partners and AAC users is how we'll ensure success in the classroom, therapy, at home and in the community. Measuring our use of evidence-based practices, monitoring our mindset, and making adjustments is how we'll make "not yet" skills attainable. Clearly written, measurable goals paired with effective data collection that has clear modifiers help students transition to new settings, teachers and SLPs.

Maintain

Backward planning keeps teams on track to continue moving forward to the goal of an independent adult communicator. Planning for transitions is key to avoiding device abandonment after times of transitions. Family led teams are able to continue leading new teams to develop growth mindsets and use evidence-based practices to continue implementing Curate™ after transitions.

Jennifer^{SLP}
THOMAS

A FRAMEWORK FOR MINDFUL AAC INTERVENTION

Mindset

The lens through which we view ourselves and our students

Messages

The focus of the framework is the messages that we target & includes the vocabulary we choose

Mode

The manner we use to communicate message with a focus on multi-modal communication

Methods

The strategies we use to teach, encourage and inspire authentic communication

Monitor

The tools we use to monitor communication partner growth and message development

Maintain

The strategies and tools we use to ease the negative impact of transitions

Jennifer^{SLP}
THOMAS

GETTING STARTED

01

DETERMINE YOUR MINDSET

To decide your mission and plan lessons, routines and activities. Ask other team members how they view their role, what their priority is, and how they will help the team. Complete the mindset worksets.

02

INVENTORY CURRENT & TARGET MESSAGES AND VOCABULARY

To identify current communication systems and messages of students and teachers, choose target vocabulary for academics, routines, and individual students. Complete the message inventory for student, routines, and lessons.

03

CHOOSE & LEARN A MODE

To teach conventional modes to communicate authentic messages, learn programming and language system, consider who will do what when, complete info forms and collect training materials in one place

04

CHOOSE METHODS

To use to teach authentic communication and language, identify which strategies will work best during different lessons, routines, and play. Train staff on methods to use during specific lessons, routines, and activities. Post reminders around the classroom and home.

05

CHOOSE A WAY TO MONITOR

To measure growth of students and their communication partners. Choose a data collection tool. Decide who will collect and when progress will be monitored for specific goals. Track vocabulary that is modeled, prompted, and used spontaneously.

06

APPLY A MAINTENANCE STRATEGY

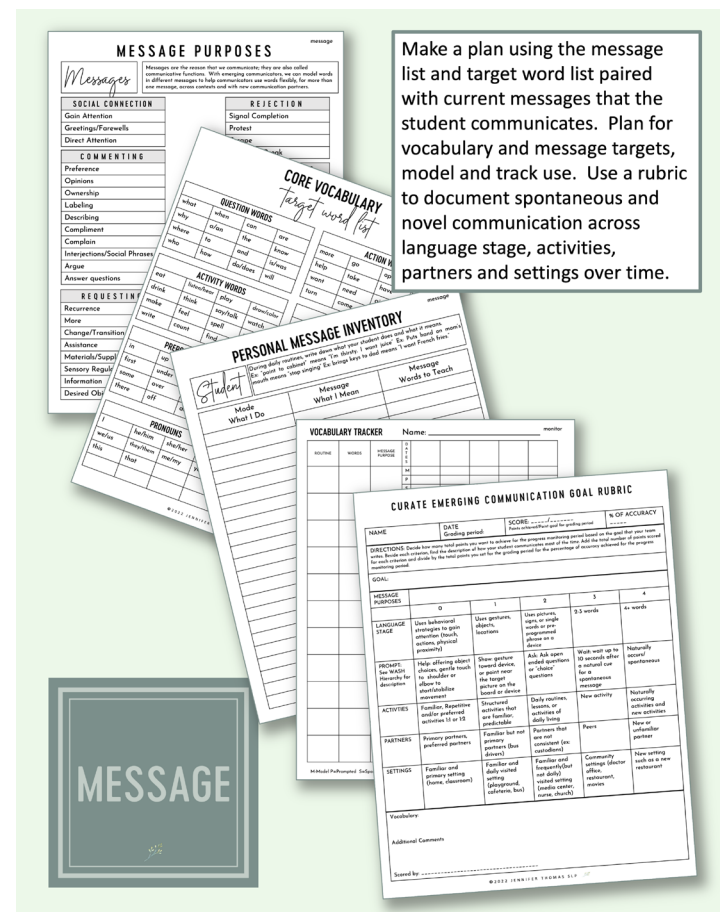
To ease getting started with new communication settings/partners. Intentionally introduce new activities using repetition with variety, new communication partners, and new settings throughout the school building, community, and home. Coach new communication partners about the most effective methods for your student's success.

Jennifer^{SLP}
THOMAS

are why we communicate and the words we choose to use/teach. I use a chart with message purposes listed each time we write goals. Word selection may vary through the lifespan, but the message purposes hold fast. I divide message purposes into seven categories: social connection, rejection, directing others, commenting, sharing information, requesting, and story retelling. As a team, we develop a current message inventory using a systematic observation tool that has partners list “what she does” and “what it means.” Then, we use a core vocabulary word list paired with highly motivating words to compile a list of words and messages that will be our first intervention plan. I divide words/messages into three categories: academics, routines, and personal interests. There are words we teach because they are in the curriculum. There are words we teach because we say them throughout the day, all day. These words include daily routines, activities of daily living, academic routines, and home routines. Lastly, we use words that relate to highly motivating activities, objects, and play. In the spirit of curating, I try to choose my first target list of words to fit into all three categories. We use a simple planning sheet with three columns to list that vocabulary as we plan; we cross-check the list to find words that occur across all three categories: academic, routines, and students, and those words become the target vocabulary for the unit. This method of planning allows teams to teach fewer words MORE times across activities, which is repetition with variety (a method...that’s coming up!)

Mode: Curate is a multimodal framework. No communicator will only rely on a high-tech AAC device to communicate ever. The first step to implementing the Curate framework is to inventory a student’s current mode of communication and to continue to honor that mode. (We do that when we complete the Personal Message Inventory). The second step is to decide on what mode to teach that helps the communicator to become a more conventional communicator so that he can communicate more messages with more people in more places. I begin all evaluations with this tool. Inventorying a student’s current mode of communication in written form helps communication partners pause and watch for communicative intent, behaviors and specific actions, gestures, and facial expressions. I have seen teams go from “he doesn’t have a communication system” to realizing that a student who doesn’t speak has a highly developed system of gestures/actions paired with objects, locations, routines, and people. Even if a team doesn’t progress in moving a student to a more conventional communication system, creating a written version of their system allows a substitute teacher or new teacher to start engaging immediately without losing instructional time “getting to know his communication.”

The first Curate form that I made was the Mode form, “My AAC Device.” When Covid shut the world down, kids were at home learning with their families, and devices were staying at home; I started getting phone calls about lost user areas and re-programmed home pages. Even the most proficient of users’ families had forgotten the actual name of their device and how many



Make a plan using the message list and target word list paired with current messages that the student communicates. Plan for vocabulary and message targets, model and track use. Use a rubric to document spontaneous and novel communication across language stage, activities, partners and settings over time.



buttons were on the home screen. And who knew when the last time their user area had been backed up, and if so, where was it saved...USB, a cloud? It's a lot to keep up with and remember...I don't even remember what year my car model is; I drive it every day. So, I made a simple form with a spot for all that information. I started giving it to families in a folder with how-to guides. I saved a copy in their IEP folder. It helped organize who was doing what, when, and where. Over time, I kept adding to the folder, and Curate as an organizational framework for categorizing information turned into a "planner" that helped teams organize "all the things" as we started when we got stuck, and as a student began a transition to a new team.

As a multi-modal framework, we also try to include screenshots of the student's home screen in the planner. We print a copy and affix it to their desk. We print a copy to practice transporting a communication device around the building and to and from home independently because the paper version is cheap. All students will continue to use their current system of actions, gestures and signs, communication, a lite tech version, and their high-tech device.

Methods: Methods are the evidence-based practices we use to teach authentic communication, language, and literacy to emerging communicators. Methods honor clinical research, the experience of SLPs, teachers, and providers, and the preferences of stakeholders. Coaching methods are essential evidence-based practices for improving outcomes. This area of the framework is where I was providing too much information, too many ideas, and too many different ways to do the same thing, leaving teams stuck in the same place. I wasn't communicating the first thing to start doing, the something to add next, and what to do after that. The opposite of too little, too late...too much, too soon! So many SLPs provide excellent language therapy but have been doing play-based therapy for so long that communicating the actual strategies they use so that teachers and families can duplicate them is difficult. So, I started out by trying to catalog the strategies that I use the most, that are the easiest to incorporate into existing routines and lessons, and those that provide the most progress with the least amount of work for students and teachers. I don't have a particular order in that I coach these strategies, but over time, I share them with parents, other SLPs, teachers, assistants, and providers, and I remind myself daily. Modeling (aided language stimulation) is where I usually start. Adopting a coaching strategy that includes not only showing them the strategy in action but providing the what, when/where, who, how, and why is important. If progress stalls, we know to ask the following questions: Are we doing it enough? Are we doing it right? Is it a good strategy for this particular student at this specific time? Do we need to add a method or tweak a strategy by doing the same thing in a different way?

I never ask a teacher to do ONE MORE THING. We don't go from a bread plate to a dinner plate just because you have a device user in your classroom; there is only time for so much. If I ask her to add

something, we talk about what it will REPLACE. My best strategies are the ones that don't add or take away; we just do what we are already doing a little bit differently. The most effective strategies are attached to routines that occur frequently and predictably. **Scalable and Repeatable** are important to consider when choosing methods to implement. If I can use one strategy that works with most of my students, that strategy is more valuable than one that only works during a small portion of the day with one student.

My "starter" pack of methods includes:

1. Aided language input (modeling) during academic instruction and daily routines. This strategy is important because it includes: learning the language, slowing down interactions, providing visual supports, and no expectation of student response. It's just changing the way you do what you already are doing.
2. Respond and Recast: Honor a student's current method by responding and then follow up by recasting the message using the new system.
3. Adopt a least-to-most prompt hierarchy and use it with every attempt to engage a student to communicate with their AAC device. I use WASH (Wait, Ask, Show, Help (to start or stabilize movement)). Learn what prompts your students use. Document the prompts in progress monitoring.
4. Provide meaningful, engaging activities with natural consequences (the science of FUN and JOY)
5. SPACE: Make sure there is space in: physical space, space in time (schedule and wait time), and space in attention (a person ready and available to engage in interactions).
6. Commenting: a strategy to use during play, shared reading, video watching, crafts, just about any time!
7. Direct Vocabulary Instruction
8. Descriptive Teaching
9. Deconstruct Lessons, Routines, and Play to identify communication opportunities, messages, and vocabulary.
10. Scripts for Recurring Activities, School Based Instruction, and Community Based Instruction

Above all, though, is being able to coach other team members to implement these strategies at home, in the classroom, and the community. When I get a call that a team needs help using their devices in the classroom, I start with a simple questionnaire and planning document (Classroom Communication Reflection) that encourages teachers to consider what they've done, what they are doing in their classroom, and how we can move forward.

Monitor:

Collecting and using data ensures that we're using the most effective methods that result in the most spontaneous, authentic communication for our emerging communicators. It's not something that you do "in addition"; there's no designated time to collect data. It's 99% teaching and the 1% pause to stop and ask, "Is



3 ways to use Curate Framework for AAC Intervention™

- 1. Curate™ as a framework:** Teams can use the six components as a conversational tool to plan, organize information, and reference when progress plateaus. It's just a way of thinking that helps a team get started, get unstuck, and get ready for change.
- 2. Curate™ as a binder with dividers:** An SLP could create a binder with dividers for each component of the framework to organize students' device info, forms, handouts to share with families, info sheets, treatment plans, and data collection tools. A teacher could use it to organize mindset worksheets, vocabulary plans, handouts that support teaching practices, lesson plans, device info, and progress monitoring tools. A family could use it to file handouts as you share them, keep device info, and progress monitoring reports. Then, they could share it with new team members to ease transitions. I also use the framework as a folder system in my cloud to file new information. I save research articles, ideas from social media, and product info based on how they fit into the framework
- 3. Curate™ as a product:** Curate™ is a collection of worksheets, information handouts, systematic observation tools, goal writing strategies, data collection tools, and classroom posters that you can use to help your team discover their mindset, set priorities, plan implementation and vocabulary targets, organize device info, learn and coach others on evidence-based practices and monitor progress.



what I'm doing working?" However, being able to pause, reflect, and document the methods we are using is a crucial part of intervention.

An example is when a teacher, Mindy, had modeled go+school locations and time + routines for two months on a classroom device. We knew the strategy was working because, after about a month, a student grabbed another student's device, walked up to the teacher, and said, "time playground" What does this data look like? "Student will combine two words to signal completion, advocate for sensory regulation or request a change/transition of activity/item 5 times in a school week." YEP. She is beginning to meet that goal by combining two words into a novel phrase to advocate for her own sensory regulation and a change in activity.

The messy part is writing measurable goals. Authentic communication is not "right or wrong," and it can't be contrived in a situation to put a + or – beside. Deciding what part of progress to measure can also be difficult because the goal may include too many criteria to document (language stage, vocabulary, prompt level, or setting). Using a rubric to evaluate a "snapshot" in time to demonstrate progress has become a routine habit for me.

To develop a rubric, I took a page from writing teachers. When grading a writing sample, teachers can grade command of conventions, introduction, mechanics, vocabulary, spelling, content, sentence structure, and closing, among other criteria. Many writing teachers use a rubric and assign points for each area they assess. I created a rubric that includes language stage, prompt level, activity, partner, and setting as a criterion. During each session, I can score each criterion based on the indicators on the rubric. Using a rubric with the end goal in mind allows us to set attainable goals for a progress monitoring period while always keeping the end goal in mind. The goal is to communicate what a person wants to communicate anytime, anyplace with anyone.

During each progress period, the team will decide the number of rubric points to achieve the goal. For example, if we'd like a student to use single words with wait time in structured and familiar activities with familiar partners in a familiar and daily visited setting, we would write our goal rubric score to be eight. Over time, the goal rubric score will be 20. Using a rubric that includes a criterion that includes various activities, partners, and settings helps us when we move to the last component of the framework, maintenance.

Maintain: By beginning with the end in mind (backward planning), teams should choose activities, make lesson plans, and target messages/vocabulary that will support our learners now and in the future. It means asking the next teacher what her schedule looks like to determine if we could start teaching vocabulary now, which will help the transition more smooth in the future. The most important part of maintenance is supporting families to advocate for communication interventions in their next setting. Device abandonment often happens after a transition because the new environment requires new vocabulary and the use of skills in a new setting, in new activities, and with new communi-

cation partners. The team decides that the student "can't use their device" because maintenance strategies weren't used, the teams didn't communicate about prompts used, the vocabulary used, messages supported, and maybe even operational and strategic skills. For example, if the student had a placemat that looked like his device, where he kept it all day in his previous classroom, the lack of a "place" to put his device may confuse him. If he had been in his classroom for three years with the same team, he might not have practiced communicating with unfamiliar communication partners. As students are nearing a transition, creating communication opportunities with unfamiliar partners is crucial to success in the next setting.

If the team sends along the goal rubric, then the team in the new setting will realize that the student was able to use their device to communicate but required an ask prompt. Maybe the new team will recognize that most communication was happening in the classroom with primary partners during familiar activities, so giving some time for new activities to become familiar will increase spontaneous communication.

The Curate framework does not provide any new information; it's just a framework for organizing all the parts of successful intervention for emerging communications. The framework is helpful for teams when **getting started** to choose messages and vocabulary, as well as to identify training needs for the team. When progress stalls out or teams **get stuck**, it helps determine the area that needs support. Lastly, we can revisit the framework when **getting ready for change** (nearing a time of transition) to ensure that we're documenting how a student communicates, how we help her communicate, and what activities/partners/settings communication is most successful.

The Curate framework could be a physical binder with handouts organized for an individual student, or a teacher may create a binder for her classroom. It could be the organizational method for your Google Drive with folders for each framework component. As a supporting SLP, I often use the framework to categorize and file new information from journals, Instagram accounts, and conferences by filing it in digital, physical, and mental folders labeled Mindset, Message, Mode, Method, Monitor, and Maintain. However you choose to use the Curate framework, the main idea is that there are many moving parts to AAC intervention for emerging communicators. Knowing why parts of your garden are full of fruit and other parts are full of weeds is critical for evergreen communicators to thrive.

More information and handouts to help organize can be found at:

- Website www.jenniferthomasslp.com
- Instagram [@jenniferthomasslp](https://www.instagram.com/jenniferthomasslp)
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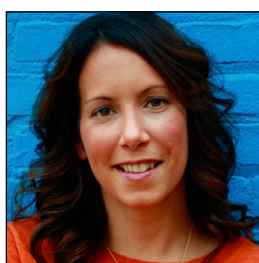
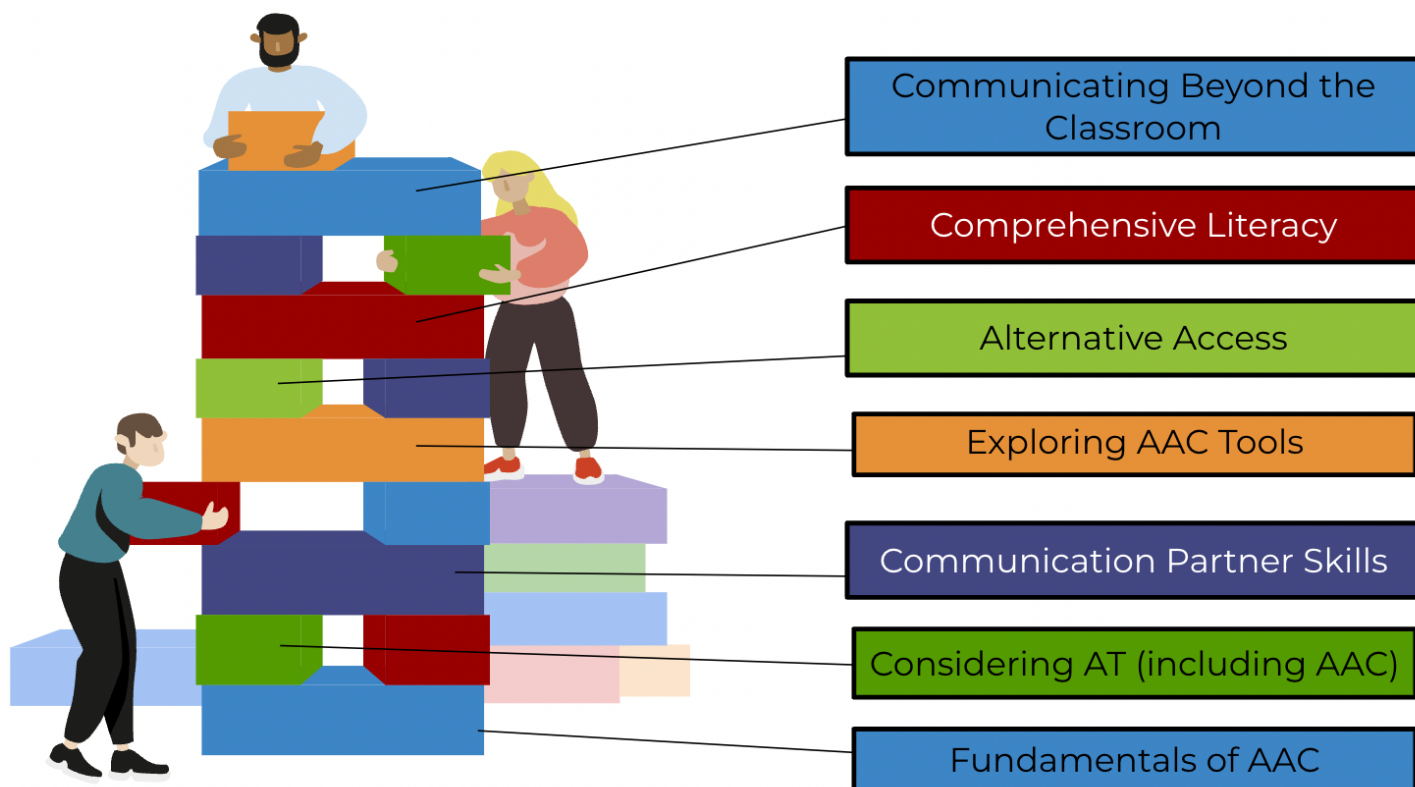
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Building Blocks to Autonomous Communication: A Systematic Approach to Supporting AAC Users



SARA PERICOLOSI, is a Speech-Language Pathologist with Alt+Shift, an Individuals with Disabilities Act Grant Funded Initiative funded through the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education. Sara has been with the project for the past three years. In her role with Alt+Shift, she focuses on providing training and assistance related to assistive technology, augmentative and alternative communication, and comprehensive literacy for students with significant disabilities and complex communication needs. Prior to joining Alt+Shift, Sara provided speech and language services to students with complex communication needs from birth to age 26 for twelve years. Sara co-hosts *All Means ALL Inclusive Education Podcast* with Carolyn.



CAROLYN O'HEARN, is a Speech-Language Pathologist with Alt+Shift, an Individuals with Disabilities Act Grant Funded Initiative funded through the Michigan Department of Education, Office of Special Education. Carolyn has been with the project for the past four years. In her role with Alt+Shift, she focuses on providing training and assistance related to assistive technology, augmentative and alternative communication, and comprehensive literacy for students with significant disabilities and complex communication needs. Prior to joining Alt+Shift, Carolyn provided speech and language services for individuals with complex communication needs for a Michigan center-based program for five years. Carolyn is also a certified PODD trainer. Carolyn co-hosts *All Means ALL Inclusive Education Podcast* with Sara.



Summary:

Building Blocks to Autonomous Communication is a team-based approach to professional development focused on the what, why, and how of supporting learners with complex communication needs. This seven-block model spans a continuum of AAC best practices that focus on the knowledge and skills needed, as well as the implementation of these skills. Learn about the development of the model, the content included, and how two AT/AAC specialists are rolling this out to Michigan educators.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is a prerequisite for teaching and learning. Building Blocks to Autonomous Communication (BBtAC) is a team-based, professional learning opportunity that focuses on the what, why, and how of supporting learners with Complex Communication Needs (CCN). BBtAC is a continuum of best practices for supporting those who use Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC), with each block designed to build on previously learned skills while explicitly teaching new information. Within this learning opportunity, emphasis is placed on the implementation of the learning before exploring additional content or information. The knowledge and skills gained within this course better position educators to provide effective, meaningful instruction to individuals with CCN.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF BBtAC

As AT/AAC specialists at the state level, we have the opportunity to partner with educators throughout Michigan. When we first started partnering with districts to provide training on core vocabulary, Pragmatic Organization Dynamic Display (PODD), or comprehensive literacy instruction for students with significant disabilities, we found that many educators had splinter skills in regards to their understanding and support of students with CCN. For example, some classrooms believed access to core vocabulary was sufficient; some students were getting by without consistent access to AAC; some educators thought individuals with CCN needed to “show what they know” before getting access to AAC; and others were fine with AAC being a speech-only initiative. Without a solid foundation and an understanding of the why, shifting mindsets and practices around supporting these individuals was more challenging.

Building Blocks to Autonomous Communication was developed to be responsive to the needs of educators.

In order to determine how we could better support Michigan educators, we met in person to list out all of the main topics from our trainings, the most frequently asked questions, and the common barriers shared by educators about AT, including AAC. From there, we organized the information into chunks, or blocks, of content that would build upon each other. For example, when we talk about AAC tools, we would like educators to have a foundational understanding of core principles including that all students can communicate, how AT supports learners, and what our role as communication partners should be. We shared this roadmap with others and, based on their feedback, we rolled out this new comprehensive professional learning opportunity in the fall of 2021.

THE TARGET AUDIENCE

Recognizing that AAC was often viewed as a “speech thing,” we intentionally set out to share this content with interdisciplinary teams. Building Blocks to Autonomous Communication supports the development of all communication partners including (but not limited to), teachers, paraprofessionals, ancillary staff, consultants, families, and caregivers. Because the information throughout BBtAC builds upon each other, the content in the earlier blocks are introductory and gradually become intermediate or advanced. Just like there are no prerequisites for AAC, there are no prerequisites to participating in BBtAC. For the purposes of this article, we refer to those who engage in the building blocks as participants or educators; even though the content is family- and community member-friendly.

THE SEVEN BLOCKS OF BBtAC

Based on our conversations and planning, the content was organized into seven blocks that provide structure and opportunities to focus on implementation of the content. See the graphic that depicts the seven blocks, starting from the bottom and building up.

BLOCK 1- UNDERSTANDING THE FUNDAMENTALS OF AAC

In this block, participants learn about the fundamentals of AAC that lead to individuals becoming autonomous communicators. As a starting point, we share an adapted version of Gayle Porter’s definition of autonomous communication: being able to say what you want to say, when you want to say it, to whom ever, whenever, however you’d like (and also being able to not say something if you so choose). We dive deeper into autonomous communication (and what it is not) and work to debunk common myths of AAC. As part of that discussion we focus on what AAC is, who would benefit from AAC, and why it is beneficial for learners. We also create opportunities for educators to reflect on their own practices and beliefs, encouraging educators to choose the least dangerous assumption. We make it known that in this course, we truly mean all students; there are no, ‘Yeah, but...’ when it comes to learners (i.e., Yeah, but... they have too many behaviors; Yeah, but...they’re too medically fragile; Yeah, but...they’re too cognitively impaired; Yeah, but... they have some spoken language, etc). We focus on all students becoming autonomous communicators.



BLOCK 2 - CONSIDERING AT (INCLUDING AAC) FOR YOUR LEARNER

In our experience, many educators do not fully understand what AT is and the fact that they are often already implementing AT supports within their classrooms. In this block, we talk about who could benefit from AT and what each team member's role in the AT process could be. We focus on capitalizing on each team member's experiences and expertises while having less reliance on an "expert." Participants learn about the components of an AT and/or AAC process, including consideration, selection, and implementation. Here, we highlight the benefits of utilizing a team based approach. We also take a look at their school or team's current AT process and help to determine whether there is a need for improving their provision of AT tools and services.

BLOCK 3 - BUILDING YOUR COMMUNICATION PARTNER TOOLBOX

The third block focuses on developing the skills of all communication partners so they are more knowledgeable and confident when supporting AAC users. Within this block, we begin by identifying who communication partners are and the need to create inclusive AAC communities within and beyond the school walls. We also focus on building communication partner skills around modeling, providing wait time, inviting versus requiring responses, and engineering the environment. We reference modeling like a MASTER PAL (by Tabi Jones-Wohleber) and dive deeper into S'MoRRRES (by Dr. Jill Senner and Matthew Baud). This block provides an opportunity to discuss the prompts we use and the benefit of aided language stimulation (also: partner augmented input, aided language input, demonstrating, etc). Participants review Kate Ahern and Shelane Nielsen's prompt hierarchy as we discuss the importance of intrinsic motivation and following the learner's lead. After engaging in this content with a few teams, we found that we needed to allocate additional time for dialogue about eliminating hand-over-hand prompting between a variety of stakeholders including teachers, paraprofessionals, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, teacher consultants for ASD, school social workers, board certified behavior analysts, and others.

BLOCK 4 - EXPLORING NON-ELECTRONIC TO ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATION TOOLS

When we are approached by educators about AAC, the topics often center around which tool is the "best one" or how they can learn more about certain apps or devices that are available. For those who are completely unfamiliar with AAC, symbolic language and devices can seem overwhelming. By waiting until this block to explore the tools, we aim to first build a solid foundation of what AAC means, who could benefit, and what the educators' roles are when supporting an individual with complex communication needs. We encourage our partnering teams to bring AAC tools they currently use to dive deeper into the features, explore the differences between core and fringe, how to customize the device for an individual learner, and understand

the language organization. When we provide this block in person, we bring electronic and non-electronic tools from our lending library for even more exploration. The overarching goal of this block is to lessen the shock or sense of overwhelm that may accompany a robust AAC system. Interested schools can also utilize this block to engage in a two day introductory Pragmatic Organization Dynamic Display (PODD) training, as Carolyn is a certified PODD trainer.

BLOCK 5 - SUPPORTING AAC USERS WITH ALTERNATE ACCESS

Remember how we covered "no yeah buts" in the first block? We return to this mentality and push boundaries when we start the conversation of how educators can support AAC users with physical and/or sensory limitations. By this point, educators have had opportunities to build their skills, knowledge, and confidence in demonstrating language, ensuring AAC access at all times, and providing robust language so the student can become autonomous. This is no different for individuals with complex bodies. During this block, we explore ten key movement issues that underlie all functional movement based on the work by Claire Cotter, Gayle Porter, and others at the Cerebral Palsy Education Centre (CPEC). We explore the differences between alternative access methods and who could potentially benefit from direct select, eye gaze, and/or partner assisted scanning (visual, auditory, and visual+auditory). By providing opportunities for educators to connect with others within their school, we continue to promote an inclusive multidisciplinary team designed to meet the unique needs of each learner.

BLOCK 6 - DEVELOPING LITERATE AAC USERS

The ability to read and spell letter by letter enables all learners to be truly autonomous communicators as they are no longer limited by the vocabulary programmed into their AAC systems. Within this block, participants receive an overview of a comprehensive literacy approach for learners with significant disabilities based upon the work of Dr. Karen Erickson and Dr. David Koppenhaver. Educators learn about and reflect upon ten conditions for learning within their classroom environment. After reviewing the four questions that are used to determine if learners are emergent or conventional, participants receive a brief overview of the comprehensive literacy instructional strategies. Additional resources are provided so educators can dive deeper into the strategies and begin embedding them into their daily schedules. Some of our partnership sites opt to receive a full emergent and/or conventional literacy training during this block.

BLOCK 7 - COMMUNICATING OUTSIDE OF THE CLASSROOM

Now that we have engineered the school environment and educators have built their knowledge, skills, and confidence to support all learners, it's time to look beyond the four walls of the school building. Communication happens everywhere and



at any time. What happens when they leave school at the end of the day or at the completion of their educational program? Will the community understand how to support these individuals in the way they want and need to be supported? Within our final block, we look at how educators can build the knowledge, skills, and confidence of communication partners at home and in the community. We describe strategies for partnering with families to support communication, including much of the content found in the third block (communication partner skills). We brainstorm with school teams how educators can start the conversation and inspire change within their communities.

PRESENTATION OF BBTAC CONTENT

BEFORE THE TRAINING

By partnering with school teams, engaging in conversations with educators, and observing AAC practices in classrooms, we recognized that educators fall at various points on the AAC continuum. Therefore, we created a simple twelve question survey that district leaders could distribute to their staff to gain a better understanding of the current reality. The survey questions ask respondents to anonymously reflect on current implementation of AAC practices, asking for a rating on a scale from “few staff” to “all staff” or “few environments” to “all environments.” The information from the survey is reviewed with the leadership team to determine which skill areas are perceived as a need among staff. With this information, combined with student data, we co-construct a training schedule that is responsive and impactful for educators and ultimately students. By targeting skill areas that are a need right now, implementation of the practices improve. While we ask for all staff to participate in the partnership, the blocked design of this learning opportunity allows staff to join when the information is pertinent to their students versus receiving all of the information.

DURING THE TRAINING

The blocks are created to provide opportunities for participants to reflect on their current practices, receive new information, and collaborate with others while applying the information to current caseloads. Each block can be presented in 90 minutes with some teams requesting additional time for planning and conversation. There have been instances where we present on multiple blocks in one session; however, we encourage teams to engage in a gradual roll out of information to provide opportunities for reflection and application, rather than racing to get all of the information. From our experience, shifting practices takes time. By slowing down the presentation of new content, we are able to provide more opportunities for educators to reflect, to challenge their own and others' thinking, to try new things, and to come back and ask deeper questions.

While working with a partnership site in 2021, they requested one hour “recap” sessions in between the blocks of content. These recaps allowed us to review the biggest takeaways or the non-negotiables of the block as well as engage in dialogue with the educators about what happened when they tried to implement their new learning. Some educators came back to the group with new challenges, while others shared staff successes as well as what they witnessed from their students. We quickly noticed that participants appeared more comfortable asking questions or sharing ideas. Recaps are now an encouraged component of the BBTAC work.

In addition to providing the content, we connect with a subset of the participants and their administrators to look beyond the training and how these new practices can be maintained over time. This multidisciplinary team creates a shared vision and goals with actionable steps to reach these goals. Throughout our sessions, we focus on identifying and working to eliminate silos that often exist in education. We aim to support the implementation of new practices through monthly coaching sessions with the partnering site's leadership team.

Traditional professional development often focuses on the what (content), while we focus on why this information or change matters for learners and how educators could make that change. We have seen a positive impact on how quickly educators, families, and community members shift their practices as well as maintain their level of commitment to this work when they have a better understanding of why they are being asked to change.

AFTER THE TRAINING

Within the sites we partner with, there is a core group of educators that engages in all of the blocks. We work closely with this smaller group of participants to further develop their knowledge and skills not only of the content, but also on coaching and supporting adult learners. This smaller team of trainers has an opportunity to dive deeper into the content as well as connect to a network of other educators from across the state who are engaged in similar work within their respective districts. This community of learning allows for greater networking, collaboration, learning, and growth. We have found that it is imperative that the sites we partner with have internal staff who can support ongoing implementation and assist with onboarding additional staff. It is one thing to know the information, while it is quite another to apply the information, especially at a systems level. This model pulls it all together.

ON-DEMAND BBTAC LEARNING

In an effort to support ongoing implementation and onboarding of new staff, we have developed 12 BBTAC-inspired modules. As we were designing the modules, we wanted to put a face to the work by incorporating interviews with AAC users, parents of AAC users, community members, administrators,



teachers, and ancillary staff. In addition to the seven blocks, content that supports the work and conversation is also included. Michigan educators can access these free modules on the [Edu-Paths website](#). Those outside of Michigan can [request a personal account](#).

WHAT ARE OUR HOPES WITH THIS WORK AND COLLABORATION

The work that we all do is hard and sometimes can feel isolating. Our learners do not develop in silos based upon our area of expertise (e.g., fine motor, speech and language, gross motor, cognitive, etc). Everyone needs to be able to communicate in all environments. When we were in the process of designing Building Blocks to Autonomous Communication, our hope was to develop a team-based approach to supporting AAC users as they become more autonomous across all environments. We hope that by looking at communication in terms of a continuum, educators and families will begin to have crucial conversations within their communities that become supportive of all individuals. ■



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