

# Rhetoric of American Identities

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### **Communication Skills for Individuals with Disabilities: The Importance and Best Practices**

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#### **Abstract**

In this teaching narrative, the value of teaching communication skills is discussed. I draw on my personal experiences as a teacher in the United States to share best practices in the field.

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#### **Key words**

disabilities, education, communication, teaching narrative

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## **Report on corona-discourses studied online**

During the past 100 years, the landscape of providing educational services for individuals with disabilities has changed entirely in the United States. For what began as forced institutionalization of young people with disabilities, has evolved over the century and is now an era that celebrates and supports person first language and inclusion (Hyder 2018). With all that has already changed, advanced research methods have driven the continued growth and efficacy of strategies, techniques, and best practices for supporting individuals with disabilities in the educational setting. Of these educational advancements for assisting individuals with disabilities, one critical area that has seen tremendous growth is communication.

As a special educator in the United States, I have had extensive experience with supporting a large and diverse body of students with disabilities; I was fortunate enough to support students whom possessed an equally diverse set of skills and strengths thus impacting the topography of their needs and the respective supports which were provided. Of these supports, the value of effective communication and strategies to enhance said communication proved to be immeasurably vital to many of my students. Guiding my students as they built their communication skills allowed me the opportunity to witness the tremendous impact these skills had in their daily lives. The ability to communicate, even in its most rudimentary form, can open doors towards profound peer relationships, access to higher education, and sustained, meaningful employment. Conversely, I have also witnessed the consequences of limited or no means of effective communication; if this area of need is left ineffectively supported, an individual's potential future can easily and quickly become hindered.

### **The Importance of Teaching Communication Skills**

Communication skills are necessary for nearly all aspects of a person's daily life. People rely on communication skills to make their preferences, wants, and needs known, to have casual conversations with friends, to find and sustain meaningful

employment, and to fully engage in an academic environment. Without these skills, a person's ability to engage in a variety of opportunities in their future may not be as likely. When considering my own students, their communication needs and resultant social, academic, and employment barriers were as diverse as the students themselves. Many of my students were adults with oral vocabularies well into high school levels. To an untrained eye or a passing observer, their speech and oral vocabulary sometimes disguised the extent of their communication deficits and, thus, exemplified that the complexities of communication reach much farther than vocal speech. Some of these students have needed support in learning what specific language they should select to evoke a desired response. For example, if they needed a pencil for math class and asked for something to write with, they may be handed a pen which is not what they needed. This type of scenario often led to the student expressing some form of frustration and disappointment. Other students of mine have needed support in expressing their myriad of feelings in a socially acceptable manner. For example, when children are learning about emotions and feelings, they are often taught simple labels such as sad, mad, and happy. As a child grows, they may discover that feelings are much more complex than the ones which they were taught in their younger years. The spontaneous discoveries of these more multifaceted emotions are rarely discussed in the explicit manner from which many people with disabilities often benefit. Some of my students have also needed support in developing their social skills, such as maintaining eye contact and conversational turn taking, and in identifying interpersonal cues, such as tone and facial expressions that are, again, often learned implicitly.

### **Common Strategies Utilized**

Numerous evidence-based practices are utilized in the United States to address communication needs. However, due to the de-centralization of the education school system, schools, educators, and programs across the country focus on and implement varying practices and thought processes for all of aspects of education, including communication-based intervention. An additional consideration to the lack of a universal approach to supporting the development of communication skills, individuals with disabilities have wide variations in their communication needs, thus demanding a varied approach to the techniques implemented so as to match the individual student's comprehensive profile – information beyond just their communication needs. The strategies and opinions discussed below are not an exhaustive list of strategies used or universal opinions held in the United States. The purpose of sharing these strategies is to evoke a reader's interest in learning more about communication strategies and to provide some examples of how and why communication is taught in the United States to individuals with disabilities.

When providing a form of alternative/augmentative communication (AAC), assistive technology is widely used in the United States. Professionals can include a wide variety of devices and technologies designed to match the individual's student current skill set and the student's communication goal. One common tool used across both school and home settings are iPads with applications (apps) designed for communication. This wide array of apps often contains various buttons that the user presses to produce speech. Typically, the button contains a word and picture associated with that word as to cue the user for its selection. There are also simpler, low-tech versions that employ the same general concept and can be made at home by printing out pictures for the user to touch to indicate their choice. In addition to using the high-tech (iPad) and low-tech (printed pictures) versions of a choice board, there are many other assistive technology tools out there that are frequently used by educators and other professionals to support the development of communication skills. Some interventions offer a variety of nonverbal response options such as handheld whiteboards, response cards (i.e. card that reads "Break Please", signals (thumbs up/thumbs down), and predetermined response choices. In addition to these external systems and strategies, educators and other professionals can teach their students to use sign language to communicate. All of these strategies have certain flaws – the most glaring drawbacks of these various systems is that the person may be relying on an external system (i.e. iPad, dry erase board, etc.) to communicate which means it may not always be available and the individual who is on the receiving end of the communication may not understand sign language, or know what a specialized response card or signal may mean.

When trying to teach a specific communication process or skill, a visual or task analysis can be an excellent resource. These tools have long been employed by special educators and other professionals who work with individuals with disabilities. A task analysis breaks down a specific skill step by step, allowing the learner to see the segmented parts of the task they need to complete (Szidon and Franzone 2009). These smaller steps are easier for the individual to process and perform which will lead to more quickly mastering the larger skill. I have used many task analyses to support my students in learning how to ask for help or to participate in a group discussion. I have seen students sit, struggling with an assignment for an extended time because, what we eventually realized, the students were unsure of the best way to begin communicating that they needed support. A simple task analysis that prompts the student to think of their question, raise their hand, wait for a teacher, and then share what they need help with can make all the difference for that student. Another way I supported my students' communication in class was via simple visuals to help facilitate interactions, such as a photo of stop sign

and raised hand placed on a school desk to prompt a student to raise their hand before sharing in class.

For many students, a primary goal for the development of communication skills is to facilitate interaction with peers. A student's peer group provides unique insight into the daily communication needs and skills of the individual with a disability (Carter, Huber, and Biggs 2015). Rather than the professional solely determining what skills to work on with the student based on the student in a theoretical vacuum, the professional should consider peer interactions, input, and feedback (Reed and Trumbo 2020). To make any headway in developing the social arena for an individual with a disability, any peer involved intervention would require both regular access to peers and careful planning on the part of the involved professionals (Asmus 2017). Interaction with peers through conversation clubs or mainstream classroom settings can be helpful and naturalistic ways for individuals to practice and build communication skills. A key to building any skill involves repetition and many opportunities for practice which would be rife when in a social setting. If individuals with disabilities are deprived of opportunities to work on these skills naturalistically, it could be of great disservice to the individual's growth of their sustained communication skills. Therefore, every effort should be made to offer students the opportunity to engage in settings where they can grow and develop their communication skills in natural ways to supplement instruction and professional intervention.

Teachers, other professionals, and parents/guardians are putting forward a tremendous amount of effort each day to find ways for their student(s) to communicate effectively. There are many approaches to take and things to consider, however the most important is that educators, professionals, and parents/guardians try. With energy behind attempts, progress can be made.

### **Collaboration with Multi-Disciplinary Professionals**

When working as an educator with individuals who have communication needs, it is important to collaborate with a variety of professionals from different disciplines, as each discipline area provides additional insight into supporting the whole student and their progress to communication development. Speech Language Pathologists (SLPs) are the backbone of communication education in the United States. In the school setting, students with disabilities have a legal right to speech services if it is determined by the education providers to be essential to their academic progress. SLPs bring a unique ability to assess and design specific interventions geared towards the individual in focus (Peckham-Hardin, Hanreddy, and Ogletree 2018). In addition to SLPs, Board Certified Behavior Analysts

(BCBAs) also have expertise in verbal behavior. BCBAs provide expertise on how to arrange the environment to systematically evoke and reinforce verbalizations both vocally and with the use of alternative communication methods. BCBAs are seen less frequently in schools than SLPs in the United States, but as time is progressing, their presence in schools as related service providers and consultants are increasing, therefore increasing their involvement in supporting a students' communication skill growth. SLP and BCBA providers both have post-secondary degrees, possess a litany of expertise related to speech and communication needs, and provide complimentary support that can yield magnificent results. Both professionals track data on the individual to determine the effectiveness of the protocols in place and adjust treatment plans as needed and they can be available to you to answer specific questions about the best way to accommodate students with communication needs in your classroom. A multi-disciplinary approach to supporting the growth of a student's communication skills is a preferred and highly effective intervention method and should always be considered when supporting a student who has communication needs.

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