

Adapting to complexity

Liz Dean charts the progress of independent practice Langlearn in supporting children and young adults with complex needs to access the curriculum with the aid of tools such as Carrier Boards, Visual Diaries and Choice Boards.

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- PARTICIPATION
- SELF ADVOCACY
- INDEPENDENCE THROUGH COMMUNICATION

Langlearn is an independent speech and language therapy practice which specialises in supporting individuals with complex disabilities. This article features a selection of ways in which we have promoted inclusion and participation for individuals who:

- have limited spoken language skills
- have intentional communication skills
- can recognise two dimensional visual cues such as photos and symbols
- cannot complete written worksheets
- can indicate a choice by touching, picking up, or eye pointing.

The examples show how published programmes and initiatives can be adapted to meet the needs of specific individuals and client groups.

Langlearn services are delivered in varying ways (by a speech and language therapist, or by a speech and language therapist supported by a speech and language therapy assistant) depending on the needs of the client. We see our role as promoting participation, independence and self advocacy (DH, 2001; DH, 2009; www.everychildmatters.gov.uk). To achieve this end, we place an emphasis on working closely with families, teachers and support staff so that the speech and language therapy input achieves maximum benefit. While there is no final answer to the way in which children and adults with communication and literacy difficulties can be empowered to become independent self advocates, this article represents our efforts to put these principles into practice.

We offer both direct and indirect speech and language therapy programmes but, unless the circumstances are exceptional, only offer a direct programme with the participation of a person central to the child's life. The programmes vary in their delivery and in their emphasis. They can, in partnership, focus on residential services (Dean, 2009a) or, to take an opposing example, centre around IT resources (Dean, 2009b).

Daily choices

The speech and language therapy programmes devised are supported by Langlearn's technical staff who, in addition to providing the resources illustrated in figures 1-5, also produce a range of

symbol / photo books which are personalised for individual clients. These symbol books are available in A5, A6 and credit card wallet sizes. The A5 and A6 symbol books follow the principles established by Latham (2004/5). However, for clients with more complex disabilities, we have found that compact 'choice-based' wallets have been most successful in enabling individuals to see the value of using symbols to make daily choices (figure 1). The symbol books / wallets all link to the individuals' communication passports (Millar, 2003) and person centred planning documents. For some clients with more profound disabilities, the most successful symbol wallets have included some elements of the communication passport such as an added short explanatory sentence under a choice. For example, under 'personal belongings', a phrase such as 'I will be upset if I cannot find these' can be added as a mnemonic for less familiar carers.

been equally interesting whether the educational setting is mainstream or specialist, and we have worked to promote included access to the National Curriculum, as well as to accredited learning such as NVQ and NPTC qualifications.

Access

Maximising access to the curriculum can be achieved through two main routes, with a combination of the two probably being most successful:

1. The individual can be skilled up, and resourced, to participate as fully as possible
2. The curriculum and environment can be differentiated to allow it to become accessible for the child / adolescent with communication difficulties.

Here, I will firstly consider strategies to support children with communication impairments who attend mainstream school, then look at how young adults with communication impairments can be supported through curriculum adaptation and help with social communication skills.

(A) SUPPORTING A CHILD WHO ATTENDS MAINSTREAM SCHOOL: Carrier Boards and Visual Diaries

Langlearn has developed the concept of topic based Carrier Boards to have symbols readily available and to provide a more efficient way of storing symbol / photo sets than small boxes. The choice of the symbol / photo sets is very important and great care should be taken to make it as comprehensive as possible whilst still being usable.

The symbol / photo sets are placed on an A4 page, printed in black and white and laminated (figure 2a). The same page is printed in colour, laminated and then the squares are cut up into tiles. The tiles are then Velcro-ed or blu-tacked onto the Carrier Board depending on the use (for example a Talking Mat will require Velcro, while a laminated Choice Board can have blu-tack or

Figure 1 Choice-based communication wallet



Whilst Langlearn, in common with many other NHS and independent services, addresses the need for alternative and augmentative communication systems, other areas have to be tackled if full participation and inclusion are to be achieved. One of our biggest challenges has been enabling children, adolescents and young adults with communication disorders to access their educational curriculum. This has

Figures 2a - 2c Carrier Boards

Figure 2a Black and white Carrier Board

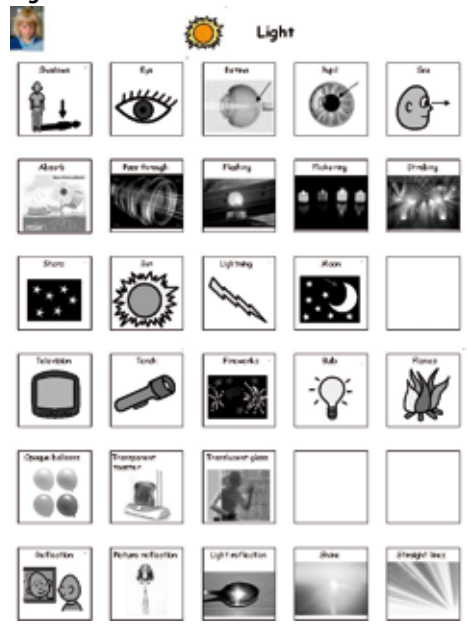


Figure 2b Carrier board with coloured tiles



Figure 2c Selecting a tile from a Carrier Board

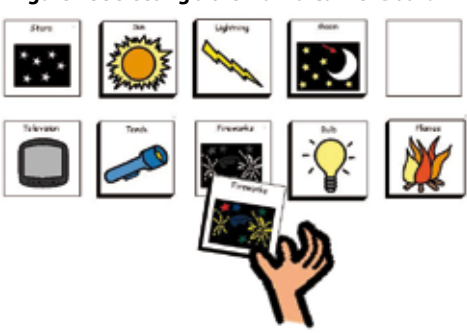


Figure 3 Tile formats



Figures 4a-b Visual Diary

Figure 4a Blank diary sheet

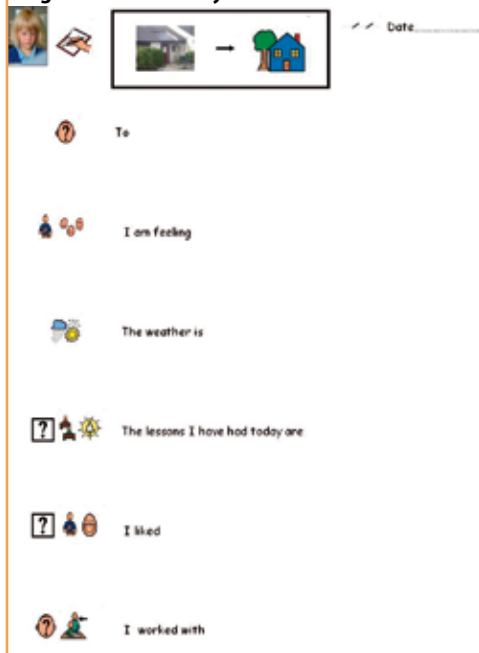
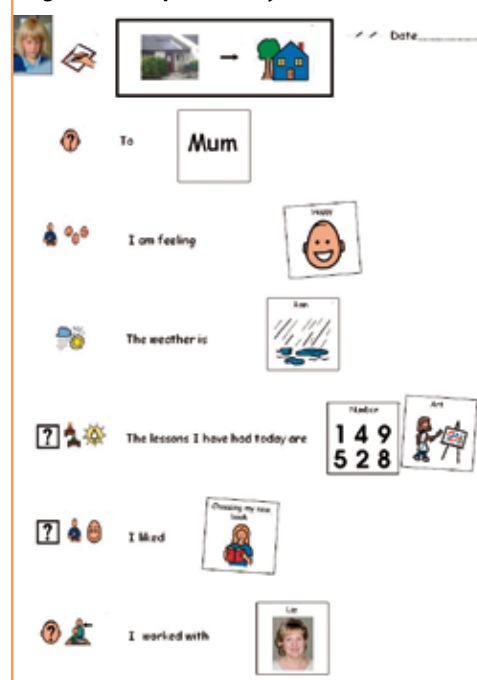


Figure 4b Completed diary sheet



Carrier Boards can be stored in personal Visual Diary, timeline or rota files. As the position of the tiles on the Boards is clearly marked, the tiles can easily be replaced after use, and clients can take responsibility for this.

The visual resources described may either support spoken and / or written language skills or replace them. If the child has a symbol book or uses a high tech AAC device it is important that the symbols provided are also on the Voice Output Communication Aid (VOCA), and / or that the vocabulary is placed in the symbol book. Using a symbol book / wallet with plastic inserts allows vocabulary to be added temporarily, and then reviewed for permanent inclusion.

The Langlearn therapist works with the teacher and learning support assistant to gather together topic vocabulary *before* a new topic is introduced to the class. This vocabulary is then put onto a Carrier Board by the Langlearn resource technician and removable tiles are made. The vocabulary may be represented by symbols, photos from the internet, or photos taken in the child's own environment. These resources are prepared by the Langlearn technical support using Boardmaker (Colour PCS symbols) and PowerPoint.

This system of Carrier Boards and tiles allows the child to:

- become familiar with the vocabulary that the teacher will use
- recognise the symbols / photos and link them with the vocabulary
- use the symbols / photos as an aid to understanding when the teacher is talking
- use the removable tiles to plan and retain an answer
- use a tile in place of a spoken answer.

This system has worked well within a mainstream classroom and the feedback from other children has highlighted the extent to which children find visual clues valuable in understanding, processing and retaining information. The fact that other children in the

class were keen to work alongside the child using the Carrier Boards naturally facilitated paired and group working and therefore inclusion and participation. These findings are similar to those presented by Widgeit (2005).

For children unable to write, the tiles are also used to complete worksheets. Whilst some worksheets are set up in advance by the Langlearn team, others need to be prepared by the teacher / learning support assistant at short notice. It is obviously important that the worksheets themselves are accessible to the child with emerging literacy skills, and we support the teacher to use Widgeit software to prepare these in the classroom.

Thinking and talking

Another area in which the child with communication disorders may have difficulty is in retelling, and evaluating, the events of the day. Langlearn has developed the Visual Diary system to give children a way of thinking and talking about their school day. The child has a diary sheet (figure 4a) which includes personalised questions covering what the child did, who they were with and where they went. The concept of Narrative Frameworks (Shanks, 2001) has informed much of this work.

For the diary sheet illustrated in figure 4b, the client's Carrier Board would be organised in the following topics:

- People
- Places in the community
- Places in school
- Feelings
- Weather

Carrier Boards are prepared individually so that the fullest possible range of answers to the questions is provided and the tiles on the Carrier Boards are produced in a format that is appropriate for the individual. The Carrier Boards are updated regularly to include new 'answers' that the child may wish to give and are stored in a Visual Diary file. Completed diary sheets are photocopied to record the work before the tiles are replaced on the Carrier Board.

Velcro). When ready to be used, the tiles can be lifted from the Carrier Board and placed on the Visual Diary Sheet or Choice Board (figures 2b-c).

The tiles on the Carriers Boards can be adapted to meet a client's individual requirements. For example, the format can be (figure 3):

- Large photo / small symbol / word
- Large symbol / small photo / word
- Word alone (if things like family names can be sight read).

The diary is also produced in a home / school version so that the child can bring news in to tell at school. Children using a VOCA can plan the news they want to tell using the Visual Diary system and then the news can be programmed into and given using the AAC device. For symbol book / wallet users, the Visual Diary can act as a catalyst to suggest new symbols / photos a child might like to add to their system. A review of previous diary sheets will indicate symbols / photos that are selected regularly and which should be added to the wallet / VOCA.

We have extended this Visual Diary system to offer a way of preparing for review; that is, to allow the child to reflect upon the activities that they enjoy, work they do well, and topics they would like to focus on in future. The Visual Diary system can be used in conjunction with Talking Mats (Murphy & Cameron, 2004) or Choice Boards (see section Bi)) if more exploration is required to enable the child to reflect and choose the appropriate tiles.

The success of the Visual Diary system has lain not just in the fact that children with limited spoken language have used this resource to support, or replace, spoken language so that they can tell their news alongside their classmates, but also in the fact that the system can be adapted to allow reflection and evaluation through visual channels. The Visual Diary system can be customised to suit the requirements of a range of individuals using AAC. An interesting observation from a parent of a young adult using a Visual Diary underlined the value of empowering an individual – he began to use the tiles to *choose* and *plan* his weekend activities in advance, as well as to *talk* about them afterwards.

B. SUPPORTING YOUNG ADULTS: Choice Boards and Social Communication

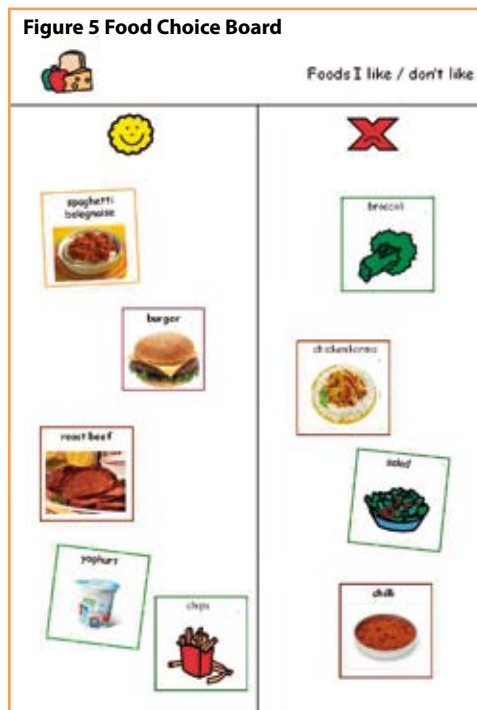
Some areas of the curriculum are particularly problematic for students with learning disabilities who also have limited communication and literacy skills. These areas are those that traditionally require discussion and reflection. Whilst the first step to addressing these issues is to provide the best possible low / high tech AAC support, other initiatives can be central in developing independence and self advocacy.

The person centered planning process has to be implemented through joint working. Achieving a 'discussion' of views or developing self advocacy skills such as choice making can be difficult when individuals have limited communication skills.

i) Choice Boards

For young adults with more complex disorders, Langlearn has supported a system of Choice Boards (figure 5). These are based on a principle similar to Talking Mats, but are pre-prepared to cover a set range of choices that an individual commonly has to make. For example, there are symbol sets supporting Choice Boards focusing on Activities, Sessions, Tasks, Places and Foods. The Choice Boards may be headed up

in different ways such as, 'Like / Don't Like' or 'Yes / No' and can be easily personalised to suit different subjects. The symbol sets supporting the Choice Boards can be produced and used in a variety of formats. Some people use Carrier Boards but, as all resources are saved on the web server, others prefer to print them out and then let students cut and paste the printed symbols on to the Choice Board.



References

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Resources

- Adult Literacy Core Curriculum – latest information at www.excellencegateway.org.uk and www.talent.ac.uk
- Boardmaker – see www.mayer-johnson.com
- National Vocational Qualifications, see www.qca.org.uk/qca_6640.aspx
- National Proficiency Tests Council, see www.nptc.org.uk/

The Choice Boards are taught using a symbol set reflecting a set of choices that appear to be known and understood by the carer, for example drinks. This allows the student to be supported to learn to use a set of visual prompts to convey a choice.

The Choice Boards are only as good as the symbol / photo sets supporting them and care is taken to update and revise these whenever possible. The usual practice is to complete a Choice Board, photocopy it if removable tiles have been used, and complete it again after a short break to try to ensure that the choice process has been reliable. For some clients with more advanced choice making skills the Choice Boards are adapted, for example to include a column headed 'I don't know'.

ii) Social communication skills

Another area in which we have found that students with limited spoken and written language skills find it difficult to join in is in specific practice of social communication skills. There are many excellent programmes which cover the pragmatic aspects of communication, such as the 'Talkabout' series by

REFLECTIONS

- DO I HAVE TECHNICAL SUPPORT AS AN INTEGRAL PART OF MY SERVICE?
- DO I BALANCE WHAT I OFFER INDIVIDUAL CLIENTS WITH WORK TO PROMOTE ACCESSIBILITY?
- DO I MAKE FULL USE OF PUBLISHED RESOURCES AS WELL AS DEVELOPING MY OWN?

Do you wish to comment on the impact this article has had on you? Please see the information about Speech & Language Therapy in Practice's Critical Friends at www.speech-mag.com/About/Friends.

Independence Through Communication Pilot

Langlearn is offering the exciting opportunity to be involved in the pilot of the Independence Through Communication Programme (ITC), which is primarily designed for people using an inclusive communication strategy and working at Entry Levels 1-3 (Adult Literacy Core Curriculum).

We have a limited number of copies of the ITC programme available on CD at a pre publication cost of £35 each to cover preparation and postage. We would like therapists and teachers to use, review and provide feedback for the programme.

The ITC programme is divided into modules (split into core activities and extension tasks) which can be followed at the group's own pace. We estimate that the whole programme will take an average of 20 sessions (including extension activities) depending on the individual learners' interests and abilities.

The ITC Modules are:

1. Introducing Communication and Establishing Group Rules
2. Meeting People
3. Body Language
4. Listening Skills
5. Asking and Answering Questions
6. Staying on Topic and Paying Attention
7. Interruption and Turn Taking
8. Rules of Conversation.

Langlearn is now working on a second programme 'Developing Communication Skills (DCS). The DCS programme is primarily designed for people using an inclusive communication strategy and working at Milestone 5 to Milestone 8/E1 (Adult Literacy Core Curriculum).

Please contact Liz Dean on ltraining788@btinternet.com if

1. you would like to purchase a pilot copy of the Independence through Communication CD
2. you would like to be notified when the Developing Communication Skills programme is ready for piloting
3. you would like more information about commissioning technical support for resource preparation.

Alex Kelly (1997), but such programmes often require the individuals to have a certain level of spoken and written language skills.

In order to meet the needs of students with more complex disorders who are working at Entry Levels 1-3 (Adult Literacy Core Curriculum), Langlearn has developed the 'Independence Through Communication' programme (Barnes & Dean, forthcoming). This is based on the authors' individual and joint experience of teaching communication groups over the last six years as a teacher specialising in communication and a speech and language therapist respectively.

The Independence Through Communication programme has five strands which target key areas underpinning communication and independence:

1. Listening
2. Expressing yourself
3. Explaining your ideas
4. Making choices
5. Making friends.

The specific emphasis of the Independence Through Communication programme is its use of accessible resources to promote the inclusion of individuals who:

- use an inclusive communication strategy; and need to process / answer using a combination of modalities such as vocalisation / symbols / photos / signs / body language
- have emerging literacy skills and cannot access the written word, or write, readily
- have memory limitations and require support to retain ideas
- participate / learn more readily if their session is structured, for example by the use of strategies to 'scaffold' heard information or responses (Shanks, 2001).

Whilst offering a new approach to the teaching of social communication skills, the authors recognised that selected parts of published resources have a place in such a programme, and so provide links to these in extension activities which supplement the main programme. We are now extending this work within a second programme 'Developing Communication Skills', designed for people using an inclusive communication strategy and working at Milestone 5 to Milestone 8/E1 (Adult Literacy Core Curriculum). SLTP

Dr Liz Dean, e-mail ltraining788@btinternet.com, is a specialist speech and language therapist who leads the Langlearn team. Langlearn offers technical support to other speech and language therapists and schools. It is also a Widgit Centre. See www.langlearn.co.uk for further information.

Acknowledgement

I would like to acknowledge Anne Edmonstone's role in developing my enthusiasm for this specialist area of speech and language therapy, and to thank her.

Strengthening SEND

The chair of a review of special educational needs and disability information has urged the government to strengthen its approach to local authorities which fail to comply with their duties.

The Lamb Enquiry was established to investigate how parental confidence in the special educational needs system of assessment and provision in England could be improved. Brian Lamb said, "We need to shift the onus from parents having to find out for themselves, to schools and services finding out what parents need." The review recognises that the nature of the relationship between parents and professionals has changed. "The previous relationship model of expert professional and ignorant lay person is no longer relevant. Professionals have one sort of knowledge, the patient, client or parent has expert knowledge of their situation (p.8)."

The Lamb recommendations, which have been accepted by Children's Secretary Ed Balls, include improvements in training, policy and monitoring.

www.dcsf.gov.uk/lambinquiry/

Dementia UK Awards

The closing date for nominations in the Dementia UK Awards 2009 is 3 July.

The awards recognise those who improve quality of life for people with dementia. Categories include 'Best innovation in practice', 'Outstanding contribution to the field of dementia' and 'Team of the year'.

www.dementia.stir.ac.uk/conference

AAC funding

The speech, language and communication needs action plan for England is progressing, with funding announced to support AAC.

'Better Communication', which followed the Bercow Review, recognised that initial funding was needed to ensure "a vibrant AAC community is in place" while a longer-term commissioning framework is developed through pathfinders. Becta has announced up to £1.5 million is available over three years through two separate streams. The first is designed to support the voluntary and community service sector to develop "strong, sustainable services that meet the needs of commissioners and young people with AAC needs". The second is for specific innovative projects which will "improve the knowledge base for high quality AAC provision."

Becta was formerly known as the British Educational Communications and Technology Agency. It is a non-departmental public body of the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

www.dcsf.gov.uk/slcnaaction/aacgrants.shtml