Teaching Early Communication Device Users

Some thoughts

Alba Somoza, Chloe Wilson, Dr. Anthony Rifkin

When teaching **early communication device users**, I focus on getting them involved, and getting them to be active rather than passive. In my lessons, I ask them to make choices and to share things. The students choose what shapes and colors they want to use, and what topics they will relate to (e.g., a Halloween or family theme). This is normal for a school setting, but it's important to remember, a normal child may make sixteen different choices in a minute and describe each, but a non-speaker may have very little experience of choosing or sharing, even when they play.

While these things could be done with any subject, I also make sure that kids with **severe physical challenges** get lots of tactile experiences. Again, it's important to remember they haven't gotten to explore the world in this way. This is one of the reasons I love making art so much myself, and I know it's good for them too.

For example, here is an excerpt from one of my lessons:

"Today we are going to use our hands to create texture with clay. Texture is how something feels when you touch it with your hand. For example, I would say the texture of this painting is bumpy. I am going to pass around this pillow for everyone to feel. Can you describe the texture of the pillow? How does it feel to touch? Use the words on your adjective page."

You can see how their active experience and communication are engaged together. Again, this is what normal kids get to do all the time, but physically and communicatively challenged kids often have not had these opportunities.

My lessons also then have them make active choices about the same. And I share how they can do what they need. For example,

"Now we will use our fingers and hands to make texture. Remember texture is how something feels to the touch. You can make it flat, bumpy, smooth, or rough - it's up to you. When I work with clay, I use my fist to pound the clay and my fingers to pinch it, and my aide uses the hand-over-hand method to help me."

With this, you can see the role the facilitators/aides play. A 'hand-over-hand' method can give a physically challenged individual enough support to do something they can't do alone. For example, I can't pinch the clay without that support. So you can see how closely the aides and students must work together. For example,

"Aides ask your student what kind of texture they would like to create. Bumpy? Smooth? Rough? Flat? Also don't forget to ask what areas of the artwork the student would like to work on? And ask students how they would like to manipulate the clay - do you want to punch it? Do you want to squeeze it? Do you want to pinch it? The more questions you ask, the more control students will have over the piece. Experiment and do what works for you. I will be working on my piece as well if you need inspiration or have any questions."

You will also see that I remind the aides of their role in almost every lesson. Very often, the aides must be taught what to do as much as the kids! But with this, everyone learns.

In my full set of lessons, you will see all of these aspects in almost every lesson. You will also see that I ask them how they are feeling almost every time. This is because they have to learn to communicate about themselves and their needs, and feelings come first in this respect.

Educational concepts can be fit in throughout too. For example, their learning about 'language arts' can be seen in the above. And it's easy to fit in concepts like 'bigger' and 'smaller', as well as many other topics. If you're interested, you can check out all these aspects in my full set of lessons. Below we've share which lessons have the best examples of which aspects.

There are also many techniques for teaching early device users. Depending on the child's challenges, the number of first choices might be kept to just two. Or they might be presented with a page with 4 or 6 choices on it. But it's important to keep things as active as possible too, otherwise their world becomes a 2-choice world, and that's not enough. Switch the choices around. Offer others, and most important, *engage your students* as you would any others. When you get into *their* world, you will see they have plenty to share!

HOW TO USE THE CIRRICULUM:

The sentences in the lessons have the following coding, so you can see examples.

CODING

C = **Communication** (the students are encouraged to communicate)

CH = **Choice** (the students are encouraged to make a choice)

A = **Aide Facilitation** (aides are guided in how to help the students make choices)

S = **Sharing** (the students are asked to share)

The different types can also occur together, for example, C/CH is when they are asked to make a choice and communicate it, and C/S is when they're asked to share something by communicating. By looking at the lessons, you can see how the lessons were created to help with these.

These different aspects can be found in the almost all the lessons, but the lessons that make the fullest use of them, so it will be good to look at those.

Instruction for Aides (While reminders for the Aides are found in almost every lesson, these lessons have full directions for the aides. These are guidelines for working with early device users, to make sure the student are *making the choices* and *performing the actions* to the extent they can.)

| Pouring | Color Mix | Collaborative Painting continued 1 & 2 |
| Clay texture | Paper Flowers | |

Feelings (I request for students to express their feelings in almost every lesson. However, in the lessons below, I went into expressing one's feeling through art. And I shared about our frustrations as device users. This is important for them to hear too!)

Collage Face   Splattering

Sponge Stamps

Tactile/Motor   (These lessons engage the students in tactile and motor experiences they may have missed out on, including making things with one's hands).

Clay texture   Handprint Animal   Collaborative Painting (see end)
Footprint   Wood Sculpture

Communications Content (These lesson encourage the students to use specific terminology. See the *Feelings* lessons above for these too.)

Clay Texture (texture terms)
Color Mix (people's names)
Collage Face (adjectives)

Additional Educational Content

Families (Family Picture Frame)
Weather/Seasons (Spring, Winter Weather Splatter, Abstract Spring w/ Paint Brush)
Social (Best Friend Card)

Art Techniques

Paint Brush (Abstract Spring w/ Paint Brush)
Splattering (Splattering, Splattering Techniques, Winter Weather Splatter,
          Collaborative Painting continued 2)
Pouring (Collaborative Painting continued 1)
Sculpture (Wood Sculpture)
Clay (Clay Texture)   T-Shirt
Printing (Butterfly Print)   Pants
Collage (Collage, Collage Birds, Collage Face)   Bags
Sponge Stamps   Kerchiefs
Fabric Marker (Bags, T-Shirts, Teddy Bears)   Teddy Bears
Mixing Color (Color Mix)
Collaborative Painting (Collaborative Painting, Collaborative Painting continued 1 & 2)
Picture Frame (Family Picture Frames)
Paper Flowers