Inscrutable or Meaningful?

Understanding and Supporting Your Inarticulate Students

Robin M. Smith

Interpreting movement.
Time.
Pointers.
Assistive technology.
Choice.
Audiotapes.
Sticky notes.

What do these dissimilar items or concepts have in common? Teachers can use them all in adapting lessons for students who have difficulties in communicating with others.

This article explores ways teachers can build competence in such students, rather than focus on their deficits. Along the way, you can learn how to observe your students to discover their strengths and weaknesses, translate body language, unravel the ways they process language, appreciate indications of humor, and interpret different kinds of behavior and its intent. Tips include ways to encourage group membership and participation, ways to influence student behavior, and ways to encourage communication and independent decision making by students.

> ***Medical-model descriptions obscure the individual abilities of students who may have unusual approaches to communicating their understanding, wants, and needs.***

Understanding Teaching Approaches

All three students described in this article (see box, "What Does It Mean to Be Nonverbal?") studied with two kinds of teachers—which we will refer to as deficit-oriented and competence-oriented (Smith, 2000). How these teachers perceive their students affected how they taught and evaluated them. Their students often responded according to how they were treated and perceived in class (Smith, Ryan, & Salend, 2001). How teachers perceive their students will influence how they instruct, evaluate, and affect their students (Biklen & Duchan, 1994; Rosenthal, 1997; Smith, 1999).

Focusing on Deficits

Deficit-oriented teachers often perceive their students with developmental disabilities as inscrutable—that is, because the students are difficult to understand, they think the students must therefore be lacking basic understanding of the things going on around them. Those students who also have cognitive disabilities may not have typical speech or facial expression; and the students may also experience language-processing disabilities, such as problems with word retrieval, delayed understanding of complex speech, or need for a longer response time in conversation.

Deficit-oriented teachers tend to teach to a medical model of repairing the (often) irreparable individual. Their descriptions of students foster ranking, sorting, and diagnosing. Such medical-model descriptions obscure the individual abilities of students who may have unusual approaches to communicating their understanding, wants, and needs. For example, teachers may consider a nonverbal student who is labeled with severe mental retardation to be unable to participate in class discussions, and therefore may have the student doing something different elsewhere in the classroom or even in another room.

Deficit-oriented teachers who think their students are inscrutable and uncomprehending may miss student communications and key skills and strengths or fail to see their relevance. In the example of Tyrone (see box), his deficit-oriented teacher had no idea Tyrone understood the class discussion and therefore made few requests that he respond. Tyrone's teacher accepted his homework assignments but did not ask about missing assignments.

Focusing on Competence

Competence-oriented teachers, on the other hand, perceive students as whole persons and teach with the students' strengths in mind. Instead of questioning if students can participate in a class activity, these teachers think about *how* students can be involved in the activity.

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What Does It Mean to Be Nonverbal? Three Students

Many of us tend to focus on the student's disability, not the person, and thus see students who are nonverbal or inarticulate as simply "difficult to understand." Students who are labeled mentally retarded or who have impaired communication, especially, are the victims of such first impressions (Goode, 1989).

The three students described here have studied with two kinds of teachers, which will become evident as you read. The first type of teachers regarded their students as inscrutable or incompetent, rather than as sources of meaningful activity and communication. They had difficulty seeing intelligence and using the strengths of their students. The second category of teachers not only saw the students' intelligence and competencies, but also helped them engage academically.

Gerard was a high school student labeled mentally retarded who spoke in short phrases. When asked a direct question, he often responded, "I don't know." Several of his teachers, both general and special education, said that he understood little of what was going on in class. A paraprofessional who did feel Gerard understood his schoolwork was working with him on some questions in a textbook about managing money. She asked him what he should do with his paycheck. Gerard shook his head and said, "I don't know." She said, "Let me put this another way. When you work at [your job], what do you do with your check? Does your mom put it in the bank or do you spend it?" He said, "Bank."

Tyrone, a student with autism, spoke in short phrases and often repeated favorite expressions and topics in his conversation. Two teachers described him as "a mystery" and had no idea if he understood what was happening in class. One day, one of these teachers was questioning the students about a history worksheet they had done on the early 1900s, asking them about historic people and events. "John Jacob Astor?" A student replied, "American Fur Company." The teacher mentioned the Broadway musical about the Astor family, asking for the title. Tyrone called out, "Scrooge." The teacher laughed, "Good guess."

Teresa was nonverbal and communicated inconsistently by pointing and making sounds. Teachers supported her pointing to answer choices written on Post-It notes. With gentle physical support, she could sustain pointing to letters on a large keyboard for a short time. She took quizzes and typed short conversations with a teacher assigned to help her with communication skills. Her other teacher assigned for the same purpose, however, was unable to engage Teresa in typed conversations and said, in her presence, "I don't think she knows her letters."

Such teachers acquire the skill of "reading" students who communicate in ways that greatly differ from their peers. They learn how students show engagement, boredom, contentment, and dissatisfaction. They are aware of their students' strengths and how these strengths might be used to support learning and achievement.

Competence-oriented teachers' descriptions of students tend to foster understanding and communication with students. For example, in Teresa's case (see box), whereas her competence-oriented teacher assisted her with exams, essays, and had meaningful typed conversations with her, her deficit-oriented teacher frequently encountered passive and active resistance from Teresa and experienced little or no meaningful communication with her.

Understanding Student Communication

You might compare students like Teresa, Tyrone, or Gerard—who differ from peers in the way they move, process information, and communicate—to a foreign visitor who does not speak your language very well but is likely to understand it. As the "native speaker," you as teacher can take on the role of interpreter as you learn the student's own language.

The following guidelines, summarized in Table 1 (page 30), are designed to help you learn about your students and become an effective interpreter.

Get to Know Your Students' Communication Strengths and Needs

Your ability to engage students depends on your knowledge of their communication strengths and needs. If you spend some time getting to know your students, you can identify these strengths and needs by doing the following:

- Sharing with the students that you are trying to get to know them, their communication styles and patterns, and their interests, and thus explaining why you are asking some questions that might seem obvious to them. Let them know you want to learn about what they have invented as strategies to communicate.
- Drawing on the knowledge of others who know the student—for example, paraprofessionals, family members, and friends.
- Observing students and asking yourself questions like these:
  - —How does this student typically show interest?
  - —How does this student show understanding?
  - —Are there atypical or meaningful body movements that are special to this student?
  - —Is this student following the conversation even when looking around or pacing? How do I know?

Inarticulate students may show sophistication with a few choice words, a joke, a comeback, or the timing of a behavior.

Table 1. Understanding Students' Communication

Get to know communication strengths/needs	Let them know you want to learn about their communication strategies. Draw on the knowledge of others: family, friends, paraprofessionals. Observe how students show interest and understanding. Learn how unique body movements can be interpreted as meaningful.
Understand movement differences	Identify problems with starting, executing, stopping, combining, continuing, or switching activities. Identify meanings of recurring movements or intensity of movements.
Understand processing differences such as:	Difficulty with word retrieval Limited response repertoire Longer wait time to respond Difficulty responding to someone else's initiated conversation
Look for signs of sophisticated thinking	Humor Insight
Understand refusal or resistance relating to:	Personal considerations or preferences Academic considerations such as needs for modifications; appropriateness of the task; need for coaching; ability to physically carry out the task.
Understand unintentional behaviors	Abrupt behaviors *may not* be related to noncompliance, nonunderstanding, or lack of interest. Student may be "stuck" in a repetitive thought or feeling. Less participation may be fatigue rather than disinterest.

Understand Movement Differences

Some students have movement differences associated with their disability. We must not misinterpret movement differences as discipline problems, resistance, boredom, or incomprehension. For example, although Tyrone often walks around the room during a discussion, he is a full participant, understanding others' communication and making relevant contributions on request.

When Tyrone is seated in class, however, he has a different way of being in motion. Although he often writes a list of five names over and over, apparently engrossed in his notebook, he will answer a question when asked. Though some teachers may consider him disengaged, his repetitive writing helps him concentrate by blocking out other distractions. You can learn about and examine your students' movement differences by observing them and asking yourself:

- Does this student have trouble starting, executing, stopping, combining, continuing, or switching activities? These are some common movement differences identified by Donnellan and Leary (1995, p. 80) in people with autism and mental retardation. These behaviors reflect neither intention nor intelligence. They reflect the need for understanding and accommodation.
- Do the movements have particular meaning? Sometimes the movements have no meaning. Students with Tourette's syndrome, for example, cannot control certain words, shouts, or twitches.

Your ability to engage students depends on your knowledge of their communication strengths and needs.

Understand Language-Processing Differences

Some students can speak, but are inarticulate. Whereas students may be capable of one- or two-word sentences or short phrases, their teachers may think they are intellectually limited or lazy.

Some common indications that students have difficulty with processing language are as follows:

- Difficulty with word retrieval when answering a direct question. Gerard (see box) was inarticulate and also had difficulty finding the words he needed to communicate with others. Sometimes, when he replied, "I don't know," his conversation partner repeated the question in a different way that also gave him extra time to come up with an answer. Sometimes Gerard could immediately answer a question if his attention were already on the topic, such as during a class discussion. In the previous example, Gerard selected the correct answer from choices presented to him.
- Some students may have a limited response repertoire. As a result, they rely on consistent alternative responses. When asked a direct question, Gerard responded "Yes," "No," or "I don't know." In health class, he responded appropriately to every question the teacher asked, including

rhetorical ones. ("Would you get on a plane if the pilot were high?" "No.")

- Some students need a longer wait time to prepare and articulate their responses. Therefore, teachers need to provide students with a sufficient amount of time in which to respond.
- Some students have difficulty responding in conversations that someone else has initiated. Regarding Gerard's social conversation skills, his special education teacher said he was lazy because he answered, "I don't know" so often. Yet, he initiated a conversation with a teacher about plans for the weekend; and when asked what he was going to do, said that his parents were taking him to a concert.

You can change the way you communicate with students once you realize they process language differently. You can speak slower or with longer wait time in between thoughts. You also can ask more "yes/no" questions or phrase questions to include the words students need to respond appropriately. When students appear to be restless, you can ask them if they are bored or need a break.

Look for Signs of Sophisticated Thinking, Such as Humor or Insight

Students who are nonverbal or inarticulate may show sophistication with a few choice words, a joke, a comeback, or the timing of a behavior.

For example, Tyrone's naming the Astor play, "Scrooge," was an obvious sign of sophistication. Tyrone's jokes and his correct one-word answers in other classes were also a sign of sophisticated thinking. One time his paraprofessional yawned when helping with a worksheet and said, "Excuse me." Tyrone responded, "You need a blanket."

Understand Refusal and Resistance

Although teachers generally consider refusal and resistance unproductive and inappropriate, for some students these strategies may be their most effective method of communication. This is particularly true of students who lack the motor coordination to write or type and who do not speak.

For example, one day a teacher was absent; and the students had a period of reading, resting, and chatting. Gerard's paraprofessional tried in vain to get him to work on yesterday's assignment. Gerard looked around and leafed through a magazine.

After a few minutes, the paraprofessional asked, "Are you being this way because all the other kids don't have to work today and you don't want to, either?"

He responded, "Yes."

Like Gerard's paraprofessional, you can attempt to understand your students' refusal and resistance by examining the following:

- Are there personal considerations and preferences? Ask students questions to find out if they are tired, sick, thirsty, bored, dislike this topic, or want to do the same thing as other students.
- Are there academic considerations? Does the task need to be modified in any way? Does the expected task make sense to the student? Does the student need coaching to stay focused and on task? Can the student physically carry out the task?

Understand When Students' Behaviors Are Unintentional

Sometimes students have unusual verbal responses and utterances, as well as nonverbal actions they cannot control. Understanding such behavior will help you to carefully interpret unusual and unexpected verbal responses and nonverbal behavior.

Because students' processing delays and unintentional verbal and physical types of behavior may be misinterpreted, based on the responses of typical students, you can inquire into such differences by considering the following:

- Is unintentional behavior misinterpreted as noncompliance, nonunderstanding, or lack of interest? Some students with developmental disabilities have unintentional types of behavior, appearing as abrupt behavior changes. Students may have tics, use inappropriate language, call out irrelevant phrases, pace, strike or challenge others, or walk out of the room or building. An event, a feeling, or a physical response to the environment, such as the sound of fluorescent lights or computer hard drives, may trigger some of this behavior.
- Are repetitive words or phrases signs that a student is "stuck" in an emotion? A student may be involuntarily involved in a repetitive thought or feeling, particularly when nervous. Some coaching or prompting may help a student move on. It may help to ask the student if he or she is "stuck."
- Is less-than-usual participation or speech misinterpreted as lack of interest? For some students, this lack of participation may be a sign of the effort it takes to suppress an involuntary behavior, such as a movement, sound, or tic.

Competence-Oriented Supports to Involve Inarticulate or Nonspeaking Students

As you get to know your students, you do not have to wait until you are expert in "their language." The use of competence-oriented strategies, summarized in Table 2, can cause you to see how your students demonstrate engagement and understanding.

In addition, you will be providing more opportunity for participation. Eugene Marcus (personal communication, 1994), a man with autism who communicates by typing, said, "Treat every individual who you meet as a dignitary from another country who does not speak your language very well." The following are some suggestions for implementing Marcus's mandate in your classes.

Students who are inarticulate are not necessarily intellectually limited or lazy; they may simply have difficulty with processing language.

Table 2. Competence-Oriented Supports

Plan ahead for student participation	Pre-arrange a time to call on students Call on students for yes/no or choice answers Assign a task the student can do to contribute to the whole class Prepare choices students can point to during group discussions Prepare prerecorded choices and answers the student can activate with a switching device
Maximize student decision making	Support decisions at each step of a project Use sticky notes to write exam choices Use augmentative communication systems: communication picture/symbol/word books; pointing, recording devices, keyboard devices, etc. Use alternative forms of written communication (e.g., arranging sentence cards for essays) Ask student to confirm answers or meaning of their communication.
Minimize effect of unintentional behaviors	Study consistency of certain behaviors Discover appropriate prompts to help students through problematic movements

Plan Ahead for Participation During Group Discussions

Pre-arrange a time to call on students. For example, Teresa's special education teacher met with the health teacher and arranged with him to call on Teresa for a particular question from the homework assignment. Then, she prerecorded the answer into Teresa's speaking device. Teresa pushed a button on her speaking device when called on in class to answer the question.

Call on students for yes/no or choice answers. For example, a student named Nick could not speak but nodded his head when the teacher asked him if he agreed with what another student said.

Assign a task students can do to contribute to a small group or the whole class. For example, Gerard's social studies teacher asked him to find a picture of the Great Wall in the school library. With the help of his paraprofessional, he found the picture while the class was doing a written assignment; and then he showed the photo to his social studies class during a discussion about China.

Arrange choices for students to point to when answering questions during whole-group and small-group lessons and during exams. Teachers, paraeducators, or peers can prepare these choices in advance or spontaneously use Post-it notes or an erasable white board.

Use recording devices with switches students can operate. For example, with the help of teachers and peers, students can answer questions with prerecorded responses, give reports, turn on background sounds for others' reports, and even prepare small-talk conversations in advance using a cassette recorder.

> **"Treat every individual who you meet as a dignitary from another country who does not speak your language very well."**
>
> **—Eugene Marcus**

Maximize Students' Decision Making

Support students to decide during each step of a project they cannot physically do alone. For example, Tyrone did not have the fine-motor coordination to cut and paste pictures for a collage in his health class. His paraeducator asked him to decide on a topic for a collage. Tyrone chose the materials, the color scheme, which pictures to cut out, and where to glue them.

Use Post-it notes to record possible choices during exams or spontaneous conversations and ask students to select their responses. For example, during an exam, the teacher wrote the choices for fill-in-the-blank questions on Post-it notes; and Teresa then pointed to her choice. Because Teresa was not always consistent in her movements, the teacher then confirmed the choice by changing the order of the three choices—and Teresa would point to the same one.

Use communication books (pictures with words, phrases, or sentences on laminated cards) for the common conversations. Communication books work well in role-plays, pairs, and small groups, as peers or teachers support students to participate and contribute.

Use alternative forms of written communication. Teachers can help students write drafts using Post-it notes or cards, and then make sure the students approve of the order. For an essay on health careers, Teresa chose sentences from texts that her paraprofessional wrote on cards. She later put them in order, along with transitional sentences suggested by her paraeducator.

Use augmentative communication systems, such as typing, pointing to letters or pictures, or facilitated communication to facilitate independent choice making. Nick, who did not speak and lacked fine-motor coordination, was looking at menu choices that were in small type and close together.

We must not misinterpret "movement differences" as discipline problems, resistance, boredom, or incomprehension.

When the paraeducator wrote the prices larger and farther part, Nick was able to point to the correct choice through a type of facilitated communication: Paraeducator provided only slight resistance by pulling back on his sleeve (Biklen & Cardinal, 1997).

Seek confirmation when students are too concise, inconsistent, or are engaging in automatic and repetitive phrases. You can encourage detail by saying, "I don't understand what you meant; please type/say it again," or "Please say more." If a student is inconsistent when pointing and is taking an exam, you might ask after each choice, "Is that your answer?"

Minimize the Effect of Unintentional Behavior

Learn if there is consistency for particular unintentional behaviors. For example, teachers can learn if behaviors such as pacing or walking out of the room are related to anxiety and try to discover ways to ease students' anxiety. *Discover appropriate prompts and indirect means to overcome unintentional and problematic differences in movement.* Some students have trouble initiating and need pre-arranged cues to begin a task, whereas others have problems completing several steps of a task and need a series of cues to complete the task. Still others will have difficulty stopping. Necessary accommodations will be different for each student, and these supports will help with such problems as difficulty in starting, continuing, and stopping an activity (see Donnellan & Leary, 1995).

For example, touching Teresa's elbow enabled her to begin pointing to her answers on a test. A picture schedule helped another student, Sally, go through the steps of a classroom activity that included getting out her supplies, using them correctly, and putting them away without prompting.

Both teachers and peers can incorporate all these suggestions. Peers can learn to draw out responses from each other and may even provide the educators with creative, fresh approaches.

Final Thoughts

We need to think of our roles not only as developers of social, academic, and functional skills in students, but also as interpreters and communication allies of inarticulate students. These are the same sensitivities we automatically use with students without disabilities in general education settings, with our peers, and often with young children—when we remember how much they really do understand.

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