

AAC & TOPIC-SETTING: Getting the Most Bang for Your Buck!

(Musselwhite, 2001 www.aacintervention.com)

The ability to initiate a topic is a crucial skill in terms of communicative competence. For augmented communicators, this discourse skill is particularly important, as topic initiation promotes **power** and **conversational control**.

Research on topic setting:

Research on interaction between augmented and natural speakers has shown that topic setting is difficult for many augmented communicators.

- Augmented communicators often have a *respondent role*, with few initiations, compared to their speaking partners (Culp, 1982; Harris, 1982; Light, Collier, and Parnes, 1985).
- Furthermore, *turntaking patterns are unequal*, with the natural speaker taking the majority of turns (Farrier, Yorkston, Marriner, & Beukelman, 1985; Light, et al., 1985).

Why do augmented communicators have such difficulty in initiating and maintaining topics?

Culp (1988) suggests the following factors:

- vocabulary constraints
 - rate & timing of message delivery
 - physical effort required
 - limited environmental experiences
 - partner behaviors

Communication Agendas or Social Purposes:

Light (1988) has identified four agenda that are fulfilled within communicative interactions:

- 1) Expression of needs/wants
- 2) Information Transfer
- 3) Social closeness
- 4) Social etiquette

Successful topic setting is crucial to these agenda, particularly for users with limited symbols.

Types of Topic Setting:

Musselwhite (1985) identifies both generic and specific approaches to topic setting.

Generic Topic Setting refers to initiating topics that speakers have in common, such as: preferences in music, T.V., or movies; general information concerning personal topics such as pets or collections; and newsworthy topics such as sports teams or politics.

Specific Topic Setting refers to initiating topics reflecting events in the user's life, permitting partners to learn details about those events.

Generic Topic Setting and Communication Agendas:

A generic topic setting approach can support the information transfer and social closeness agendas. For example, the generic topic setter, "I love rock music. How about you?" can contribute to the following social purposes identified by Kraat (1985). 1) Help the user acquire a feeling of belonging (*see? I like the same music you do!*); 2) Reflect aspects of the user's personality (*these are my interests*); 3) Create/change the perceptions of others regarding the augmented communicator as a person (*observe — this person is way cool!*)

Specific Topic Setting and Communication Agendas:

Specific topic setting approaches are particularly well-suited to achieving the information transfer agenda, with partners learning of important events such as a haircut, a new baby brother, or a trip to McDonald's with grandparents. In the process of this information transfer, it is highly likely that social closeness will also be increased.

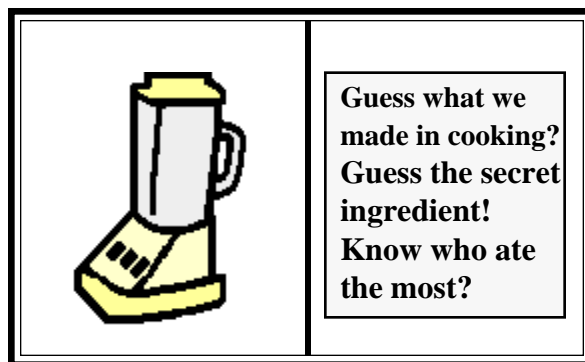
SPECIFIC TOPIC SETTING

David Beukelman (1985 NCACA Conference) suggested developing *topic setter books* that can be used to help augmented communicators communicate across boundaries. We have used this concept with many individuals having differing communication needs and with a wide range of cognitive levels. Topic Setters should meet these criteria:

- High interest to user (favorite pet, collection)
- Opportunity for at least two turns per partner before interaction is completed (e.g., use of follow-up questions or guessing)
- Promote conversation by partner on topic specified by user.

Sample Topic Setter Materials:

- Momentos from outings (napkin from Wendy's, "dead" circus balloon)
- Tidbits suggesting events (swatch of hair from haircut, new shoes tag)
- Instant photographs
- Simple pictures (Mazola pic from magazine, Pokemon characters from catalog)
- Line drawings (hand on computer, specific pair of funny glasses)
- Conventional symbols (DynaSyms, PCS)



Instructions for Communication Partners

It helps to have questions written on PostIts, with answers on the back. An "instruction block" also helps partners know how to communicate, and be more comfortable in their interactions. The user's communication displays should also have references to the Topic Setter (TAKE A PICTURE OF THIS FOR MY TOPIC BOOK; LOOK IN MY TOPIC BOOK)

Hi, I'm Matt. When I look at a picture, it means I want to talk with you. Please ask me questions that I can answer by looking at something or answering YES (by blinking my eyes) or NO (by looking away. REMEMBER – let me have a turn every time you have a turn!

Hi, I'm Katie. I have some neat things to show you. Ask me the questions on the PostIt notes, or other questions I can answer by signing, answering yes/no questions, or answering "wh-" questions.

PostIt Questions and Prompts

- 1) Guess who took me to the circus?
(choices: Mommy, Aunt Carolyn, Nana & Boppy)
- 2) Guess who spilled their drink on the man in front of us?
- 3) Guess my favorite act.
(choices: clowns, lions, tightrope walker)

Answers (on back)

- 1) Nana & Boppy
- 2) Boppy - boy was the man mad!
- 3) Tightrope walker

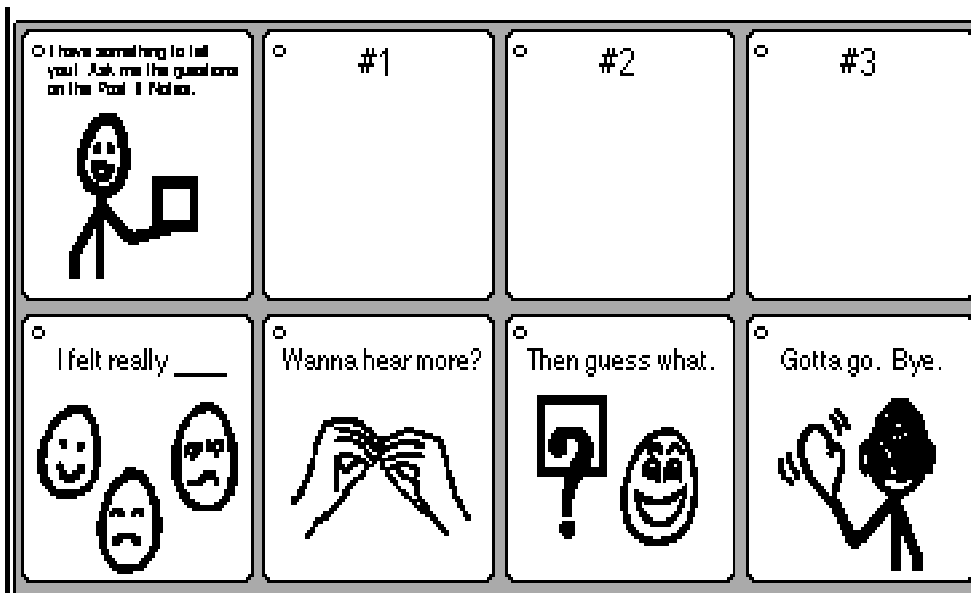
Training In Use of Specific Topic Setters

Observation indicates that topic setter notebooks are used more frequently and more interactively if a sequenced partner training is used:

- 1) The individual who places the topic setter does so in cooperation with the user ("How about this question - 'Who spilled their drink?' ")
- 2) The topic placer should next role play topic initiation and question answering. With young children, a puppet or third party may be necessary. ("When Sandy comes over, point to LOOK IN MY TOPIC BOOK. Now pretend I'm Sandy: 'Who spilled the drink? You?. . . Boppy?. . .")
- 3) The topic placer now brings in the third person and facilitates the interaction only as needed
- 4) That third person is now asked to facilitate an interaction with another person ("Sandy, when the bus driver comes in, I think Katie wants to show this to her.")

Through this sequenced approach, the user becomes familiar with the topic setting process across a variety of partners, with the aid of facilitators. Equally important, partners learn how to better interact with the user, in a carefully structured situation.

INCREASE COGNITIVE ENGAGEMENT: Device Ideas



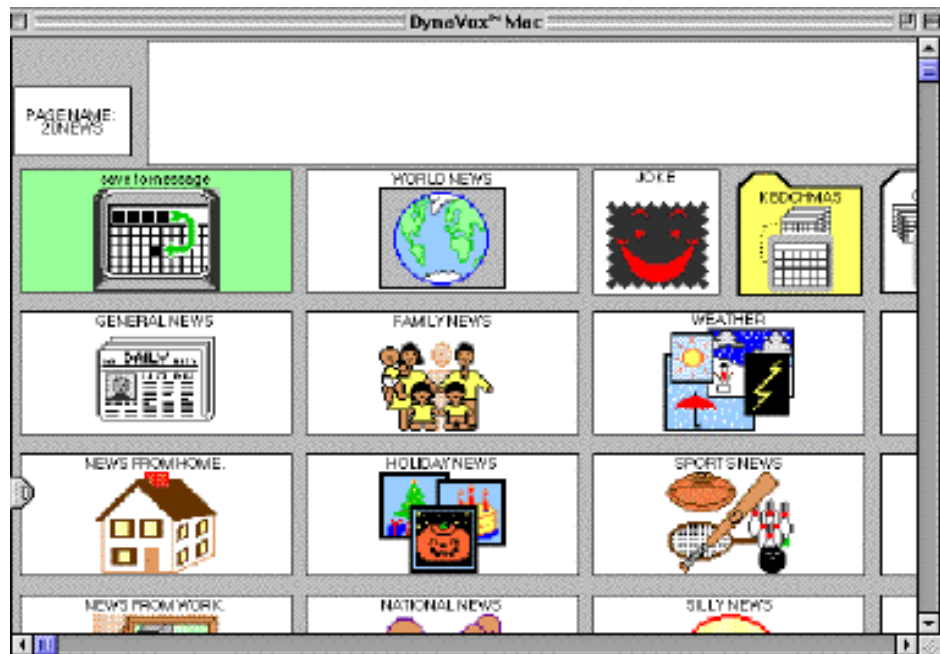
Specific Topic Setter (Musshwhite, 2000)

Levels Based Devices

Add Post It's or plastic pockets from Adaptation to cells #s 1 - 3; change materials / notes every day!
Great for Levels Based Devices such as: Macaw, DigiVox, TechTalk, Cheap Talk 8

Dynamic Display Devices

Create your own specific topic setter pages, or use those provided for you (such as the 20NEWS from the DynaVox Sample Pages, illustrated).



Minspeak- Based Devices

Select an icon sequence that is meaningful for storing specific topic setters. Consider developing categories, such as:
messages about home = PHONE + HOUSE + ICON
messages about school = PHONE + KNOW + ICON



Ex: PHONE + HOUSE + DOG = story about dog