

## UNIT 2

**Listening and Gathering Information to Support Shared Thinking**

(November &amp; December)

"Just as any one food is not nutrition, words alone are not communication. Put all the team heads together to determine ... his social language pragmatics teaching needs. Actively teach her to understand body language, facial expression, vocal nuances. He will not 'just pick it up' as he goes along. It requires perpetual integration. Every teacher, every setting, every day."<sup>1</sup>

-Ellen Notbohm

In the same way that actively listening is a prerequisite to learning with others, it is also an expectation in social interactions. Along with listening, social exchanges and group learning require processing the provided information, recalling previously known information and then sharing one's thinking. The ICT classroom asks all students to think together, as school is in essence about collaborative learning. Therefore in SDI we facilitate experiences that call on students' strengths in order to motivate them to process, recall and share thinking. This strength & interest-based approach supports collaborative learning and ultimately gives our students greater access to the curriculum.

In her book about making sense of middle school, Blythe Grossberg<sup>2</sup> discusses some classroom musts that may be particularly challenging for a Nest student when

gathering and sharing information. She presents some 'basic rules' for engaging in classroom learning such as: contribute to classroom discussion but do not monopolize the conversation; allow others to speak; speak about material related to the present study and not unrelated topics; note other students' points; comment and expand on their ideas and allow for various opinions; check your own and other's body language; and communicate respectfully with teachers. While not an exhaustive list, these are some examples of social guidelines for learning in the classroom. Following these rules are also *expectations* in school and for a neurotypical student they are intuitive, requiring only quick reminders if they are not followed. However, for Nest students, such expectations and nuances of communication may not be obvious and require much more than a list of rules and simple reminders. Such expectations need to be highlighted, modeled, explored, discussed, applied and then, highlighted, modeled, explored, discussed and applied again and again across contexts in order to keep them relevant and flexible.

Classroom instruction also demands dynamic language skills such as making inferences and associations, understanding abstract concepts, negotiating, debating and reporting. As educators giving instruction to a diverse group of students, understanding these demands in the classroom enables us to make adjustments and to "teach our students the way that they learn." We differentiate both social and academic instruction to build such

<sup>1</sup> Notbohm, E. *Ten things your student with autism wishes you knew* Future Horizons, 2006 p 55

<sup>2</sup> Grossberg, B. *Asperger's Rules! How to make Sense of School and Friends*, Magination Press, 2012 p. 58-59

language skills as listening, processing information, and the sharing of ideas. What does each student need to listen? Do they need multiple exposures to content in order to process the information? Does a declarative statement or priming support a student in sharing their thinking? Additionally, in SDI we ask ourselves: Does the student know what they need to listen and do they self advocate? This is essential differentiated instruction that best supports each student's unique way of learning, thinking, gathering and sharing information.

Another challenging aspect of social communication for students with ASD is pragmatic language or reading non-verbal cues (i.e. facial expressions, body language, tone). In SDI we explore non-verbal language and how it both increases our understanding of others' messages and adds meaning to our own message. "Everyone's body sends a message, even if they don't mean for it to" is just one example of a concept explored in SDI that builds awareness and encourages the processing of pragmatic language.

In addition to non-verbal language, students with ASD may not easily process the emotional content (episodic memory) of a communicative exchange. Therefore, they lose the salient pragmatic content of a specific experience or situation. Tying the emotion of an experience to your memory of it increases its value and therefore deepens communication.

We support memory building by emphasizing the social aspects of an exchange (highlighting the social relevance). In SDI focus time we use photographs, video and provide labels of experiences (e.g. "The Chewbacca Shout-out", "THE Big-Bang Idea") to encourage group thinking. These strategies can be utilized in the classroom to provide visual

support and verbal reminders of connected thinking and group thought. A growing awareness of the emotional content of an experience enhances the processing of pragmatic language.

It is important to note that while building pragmatic language encourages more connected shared thinking, both processing and applying this aspect of communication can be extra taxing for those who don't utilize this information rapidly and intuitively. These challenges can compromise quick responding in the classroom or complicate what is already demanding in conversation. Therefore as educators, we first consider *what* is challenging about communication within the classroom and the therapeutic setting. Only then can we support language and memory processing to increase listening, recall, and the sharing of information.

SDI's approach to building awareness and experience sharing, is the foundation for thinking socially and navigating social situations. For the middle school student we add social cognition by actively exploring relevant concepts. For example, in both SDI focus time and the classroom we work on: reading others' intentions such as the teachers', peers', characters', historical figures', and connecting our thinking. In other words, we are thinking through how to listen, process and recall social information to help navigate various interactions. In our 'lab-time' (focused SDI), we investigate hidden social rules, explore concepts through discussion and activities, and we build awareness to ultimately encourage self-advocacy.

Through highlighting or revisiting strengths and interests in Unit 1, we laid the groundwork for defining, exploring, and practicing self-advocacy In Unit 2.

Self-advocacy allows a person to *meet* responsibilities, not get out of them.

It allows a person to participate in activities in a way that works for them, not skip them.

- Zosia Zaks

Zosia Zaks' self-advocacy curriculum<sup>3</sup> is implemented in order to, "help students express their needs and problem solve with members of their (school) community". The concept of self-advocacy is introduced through Zosia's exploration:

*What is self-advocacy?*

- **Knowing who you are**
- **Explaining and asking**
- **Participating in life**
- **Responding to others**

While exploring what it means to self-advocate, this unit focuses on the first aspect: *knowing who you are*. Discussions begin with revisiting strengths in order to identify individual *challenges*. Students continue building their understanding of what it means to self-advocate and how this is relevant to them individually by discussing *participating in life* and *responding to others*. For 8<sup>th</sup> grade groups, once relevant strengths and challenges are revisited and self-advocacy is understood, we move on to the Self Advocacy Action Steps.

1. Identify the problem.
2. Explain how the problem affects me
3. Suggest a possible solution.

Throughout middle school, a focus on social engagement and social cognition is believed to best support our students learning with their peers. Because social communication is dynamic *and* complicated in adolescence, we revisit the aspects of language discussed in this unit every year. In this way each student can continue to build self-awareness about their abilities and needs in order to participate in the world around them.

### Vocabulary & Concepts UNIT 2

Whole Body Listening™  
(*understanding social expectations*)

vs.

Knowing What **I Need** to Listen  
(*& self-advocating*)

Our Bodies Send a Message↵

"Her eyes (his face, body, tone) are telling me..."

Social Clues

Smart Guesses™ about Intention (body language)

Reading the Room

Thinking with your Eyes™

Connected Thinking (thinking together)

Sharing Your Thinking

**Group Thinking/ Group Thought**

"Brainmatch" "Thinking the same thing"

**Smart Guess/ (Wacky) Guess™**

Hidden Social Highlight↵

Hidden Curriculum\*

Figuring out someone's plan/Sharing your plan

Strengths Challenges Self-Advocacy

### **CORE CONCEPTS IN BOLD**

™ Michelle G Winner

↵© social underground

<sup>3</sup> 2013 ©Keeping It Real <http://www.projectkeepitreal.com/zosia-zaks>

\*Hidden Curriculum: *a side effect of education, they are lessons, which are learned but not openly intended such as the transmission of norms, values, and beliefs conveyed in the classroom and the social environment*<sup>4</sup>.

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\*The Hidden Curriculum: Practical Solutions for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations Myles, B.S., Trautman, M.L., Schelvan, R.L. AAPC 2004

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<sup>4</sup> Giroux, Henry, & Penna, A. "Social Education in the Classroom: The Dynamics of the Hidden Curriculum." *The Hidden Curriculum and Moral Education*. Ed. Giroux, Henry & Purpel. Berkeley, California: McCutchan Publishing Corporation, 1983. 100–121.