The Augmentative and Alternative Communication Olympics: Raising and Showcasing Communication Competencies

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Abstract: The Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Olympics is a project serving a twofold purpose for augmented communicators in the Broward County Public School System in Florida. While allowing young augmented communicators to build competencies in using AAC devices, the Olympics provide a meaningful extracurricular experience to students with significant communication and physical disabilities. Training sessions give students the structure needed to hone AAC skills to increase their proficiency with the technology that likely will be their primary means of self-expression for life. The practices also provide social and learning opportunities that special education students don't often get outside of the classroom. Participants can develop relationships with peers of differing abilities while their parents meet the parents of other augmented communicators, often for the first time. This article discusses the background and success of the inaugural AAC Olympics, as well as considerations for its future.

Keywords: AAC Olympics, Building, Demonstrating, Competencies

An organized event for elementary and high school students who use alternative and augmentative communication (AAC) devices can raise the comfort level with the devices while contributing significantly to their competent and consistent use of the technology. Such activities allow students to meet other augmented communicators, in some cases for the first time, and to learn from more experienced communicators. This can help to alleviate the sense of isolation that students with disabilities may experience in learning or social situations especially when interacting with peers who do not have disabilities. Also these events can motivate augmented communicators to set new communication goals and enhance their social development.

One example of such an event is the AAC Olympics at Nova Southeastern University in Davie, Florida (Everybody Is a Winner in AAC Olympics, 2003). Students in the Broward County Public School System with significant physical disabilities and profound expressive language impairments with the ability to hold a conversation using assistive technology qualify to participate in the AAC Olympics. This article highlights the inaugural event, held in December 2002, discusses plans for, and provides an epilogue highlighting the second AAC Olympics in late January 2004 (C. B. Weech, personal communication November 18, 2002 through January 13, 2003; B. Saunders, personal communication November 21 through November 26, 2003; May 6 through 28, 2004).

A Desire to Break Barriers, A Plan to Break New Ground

Opportunities for students with the most significant disabilities to participate in extracurricular activities that foster both opportunities to build relationships with peers and positive learning experiences are rare. Augmented communicators face additional barriers to participating in such activities because of the challenges they encounter in their attempts to express themselves both in and out of school. These include physical and mechanical difficulties, natural time

constraints and communication partners who fail to listen. Such barriers often are compounded by limited opportunities to practice using the technology both in and out of school, often stalling their development of language skills. In her proposal for the grant for the AAC Olympics submitted in the spring of 2002, Weech wrote:

Because it takes augmented communicators (i.e. individuals using an electronic device) longer to produce an utterance than speaking peers, they are not often given as many opportunities to participate in the frequently fast-paced world of the classroom. Communicative efforts are thus not reinforced, leading to the disappearance of newly developed skills. In a vicious cycle, augmented communicators are then seen as less competent and are given even fewer chances to contribute to class activities. This eventually leads to non-use of the electronic devices that might provide the only avenue for displaying social and cognitive competence. (p. 2)

Weech (2002) also noted that the parents of students who use AAC devices have limited opportunities to network with other parents of augmented communicators or to see their children with disabilities participate in school-sponsored activities. She and her colleagues at the Exceptional Students Education Program (ESE) in Fort Lauderdale believed that an event such as the AAC Olympics, loosely modeled on an interscholastic athletic competition, would fill gaps in both areas. Weech referred to the event as an exhibition giving each student a chance to showcase and be recognized in a positive way for his or her abilities rather than a contest in which their abilities would be judged. It was decided early in the planning stage to present all participants with a gold medal as a reward for their efforts and performance.

The inaugural AAC Olympics was sponsored by Citibank's Success Fund Grant, which is administered by the Broward County Educational Foundation for Broward County Public Schools. The South Region Assistive Technology Education Network, vendors of AAC technology and local businesses also provided financial or in-kind support.

From Practice to Performance

Twelve students representing 11 South Florida schools participated in the AAC Olympics, including two adult students who served as masters of ceremonies for the event. After-school training sessions that began in October focused on helping them to build communication and language skills needed to succeed in games to be played at the event, which took place on a Saturday in mid-December. The sessions were held in a classroom engineered for children using AAC on the Nova Southeastern campus.

Members of the school system's assistive technology team, including seven speech-language pathologists, a teacher and an occupational therapist, facilitated the sessions. Assisting them were faculty from the speech and language pathology program at Nova Southeastern and parents of participants. The university's AAC lab assistant, a graduate of the Broward County Public Schools and an augmentative communicator, also served on this team of volunteers. Each participant received one-to-one support from a volunteer. The team of volunteers used a training protocol to ensure that all participants received identical instruction in the skills required for the event. Facilitators considered the goals of each student's individual education plan, information gathered from a brief and informal assessment done with each student at the first session, and their own AAC expertise in determining which skills the students would aim to improve. These skills included (a) vocabulary retrieval and message

clarification; (b) fluency, including the use of word prediction; (c) narrative writing and text editing; (d) speed and accuracy using switch access; (e) message formation and sequencing; (f) re-wording phrases and sentences; and (g) word morphology, the ability to change the tense or form of a word.

The sessions included separate drills for each skill and opportunities to use the skills in games that ESE staff invented specifically for the Olympics. The vocabulary that the students used while in training was different than that used in the actual event.

Olympics participants included users of both low-tech and high-tech communication devices. Games were modified during the training period to accommodate the abilities and progress levels of the students, and to encourage greater use of communication symbols to build messages as moderators found some students to be overly dependent on letter-based communication (i.e., spelling), defeating the purpose of the activities.

It's How They Played the Game

The AAC Olympics audience of roughly 70 people included family members, friends, teachers and former teachers of the participants, as well as other members of the local education community. During the opening ceremonies, participants, wearing AAC Olympics T-shirts with the name of a sponsor shown on the back, made their way to the stage as a recording of the theme song from the International Olympic Games played in the background. The master of ceremonies introduced each younger participant, using biographical information that he gathered from interviews with each participant, and then programmed the information into his device. The students then participated in a series of three language-based games. Though not competitive in a traditional sense, the games provided incentive for the students to

move forward in their use of AAC devices. As Weech (cited in Everybody Is a Winner in AAC Olympics*, 2003) noted, "They did not compete against each other. They competed against the skills with which they entered" (p. 8). While facilitators made it clear that the purpose of the games was not to determine who could communicate the fastest, some noted that the event seemed to trigger a natural competitiveness for some participants.

The object of the first game, 'I Spy,' was for the students to identify, find and say a word as quickly as possible after hearing a moderator's description of the word. A game called 'Yo-Yo' required each participant to name as many items as possible in a single category (i.e., fast food) using the method (retrieval of vocabulary directly from communication page or from a pop-up) that was fastest for him or her. The third game, 'Quick Change,' required each participant to use the word morphology feature of the communication device as quickly as possible.

In keeping with the effort to highlight the strengths of each participant, some students demonstrated their AAC skills by performing activities other than or in addition to the games. One student, for instance, told jokes programmed into his device. Another recited a holiday poem.

Outcomes and Benefits

The AAC Olympics served as a catalyst for noticeable improvement in the everyday communication practices of participants. The following examples are presented to illustrate changes that occurred in the lives of these young children.

One boy who participated in the Olympics, a bright sixth-grader, uses a DynaVox 3100 to communicate. Fully included in regular classes at school, he constantly seeks new mental challenges and ways to stimulate his creativity.

The AAC Olympics provided both along with the practical benefit of helping him to break his habit of spelling out all he had to say using the QWERTY keyboard on the device, which he accesses via visual, three-column scanning. His participation in the event taught him to retrieve words and phrases on the device for faster and more efficient communication. He reported himself that, with the aid of his device, he has "gotten better at scanning" and has "learned to find the words on his DynaVox instead of spelling them." This boy particularly enjoys writing. The skills he cultivated through his training for the AAC Olympics will allow him to progress with his goals of learning to edit his work and to e-mail his friends using the device.

Another Olympics participant, a six-year-old girl, is in a fully inclusive first grade classroom at school. She's been using her DynaMyte more often to express needs at home than she did before participating in the AAC Olympics, her mother stated. She makes more frequent use of the device's word morphology feature and her sentence construction has improved. It surprised the girl's mother that despite its non-competitive nature, the AAC Olympics has helped her daughter to overcome her shyness. She said her daughter now communicates more confidently when using the DynaMyte when she's with more than one person at a time.

A nine-year-old boy who receives home schooling and communicates using a DynaVox 3100 that he accesses via direct selection, developed "a more mature way of expressing himself" through his participation in the AAC Olympics, his mother stated. For example, instead of simply saying 'red' when asked what his favorite color is, he now replies in a full sentence, saying, "My favorite color is red." The boy also navigates his communication pages with greater precision than before, allowing him to find and select vocabulary in a more efficient manner. His

mother said that the greatest challenge for her was to resist the inclination to compare him to other participants though the non-competitive atmosphere helped her to avoid that.

Post-game Feedback

The single source of quantifiable feedback on the AAC Olympics was the response to a form letter asking parents whether they wanted ESE to repeat the event the next school year. Organizers reported that the response was overwhelmingly positive.

An Encore and New Strategies

Preparations for the second AAC Olympics reflect the success of the inaugural event. Fourteen students, including three newcomers, accepted invitations to participate in the 2004 event. Many participants will be using advanced skills developed through last year's competition. Six training sessions, conducted in the same manner as before, will have occurred before the day of the event.

This year's AAC Olympics will focus on increasing the length of verbal output that participants are able to deliver using their devices. One new game designed to help meet this objective is a variation of Jeopardy, the television game show. Attendants of participants noted that the augmented communicators rarely asked questions, waiting for others to address them first instead. Because the game requires contestants to provide questions that match answers presented to them, organizers of the AAC Olympics thought it would be a good tool to encourage communicators to ask questions in real-life situations.

The 2004 AAC Olympics also will feature more writing activities using computer emulation technology with the communication devices. Another goal is to

increase support for the event from local businesses beyond monetary donations and in-kind resources such as medals, T-shirts and refreshments. Organizers hope that by generating greater community support, the AAC Olympics will raise awareness of AAC in segments of the community with little or no exposure to it.

Epilogue

While the second AAC Olympics on January 31, 2004, largely replicated the inaugural event, the event reached new levels on various fronts. Twelve participating students (11 returning from last year and one newcomer) played a completely different set of games requiring them know more about the operation of their communication systems and to demonstrate advanced skills in their use of the systems. While last year's event focused on the retrieval and delivery of single-word vocabulary, the goal of this year's event was for students to increase their mean length of utterance by using longer phrases and sentences. Students played variations of the television game shows Jeopardy and $10,000 Pyramid, using phrases and sentences to make relevant comments in the course of the game. Such statements ranged from, "It's the next contestant's turn," to "I'll take Pop Music for $200" when choosing a Jeopardy category, to "I learn about Abraham Lincoln" when asked to name things one learns in history class in the $10,000 Pyramid game.

Two students participated in the Olympics by conducting a survey of their peers during the practice sessions and presenting the results during the actual event, an activity designed to build conversation turn-taking skills. The students asked questions on topics of interest to young people (i.e., "What's your favorite food?").

Parents again gave positive feedback after the event. Noting that they are not always present during their children's speech therapy sessions, parents said that they appreciate the AAC Olympics because it presents an opportunity for them to learn about features of the communication devices. A girl who accessed her device via direct selection told her mother that she wanted to go back to using her head switch because she was impressed when she saw another Olympics participant access his communication device with considerable speed by using a switch.

The effort to raise AAC awareness through the AAC Olympics advanced with the 2004 event, which attracted an audience of approximately 12 more people than the 2003 event. A professional videotape of the 2004 proceedings has provided organizers with a tool for generating publicity and soliciting financial support for future events. The 2004 AAC Olympics was not grant-funded, but increased monetary and in-kind support from businesses, vendors of AAC products and non-profit AAC organizations and anonymous donors covered the associated costs. Organizers are considering ways to enhance future events, such as recruiting more students from the district to participate, inviting other school districts to participate, increasing volunteer support and promoting the Olympics as an opportunity for young augmented communicators to develop a social network while learning from one another.

References

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