Promoting Communication on the Fly for Students with Significant Disabilities, Including Deaf-Blindness: Top 10 Tips for Partner Assisted Scanning
(Hanser, 2007)

Students with significant disabilities, including those with deaf-blindness often have limited methods of communication. Partner assisted scanning is a commonly used strategy to promote communication when an AAC system does not have the appropriate vocabulary or is not available. Very simply, during partner assisted scanning the "partner" lists or "scans" through the students' choices, presented in a visual, auditory, tactual and/or signed format. The student makes an indication when their desired choice is being presented. As with any skill that we teach, it is important to provide ongoing models of exactly what we want students to do. As such, others need to model partner assisted scanning consistently and throughout all activities. This handout offers simple tips for implementing partner assisted scanning.

1. Motivation, Motivation, Motivation!!

Consider the students' motivation to engage in the task. Often, if they don't respond, they may be perceived as not being able to make choices, when in fact, that they are simply not motivated to do the activity. For struggling switch users, making consistent movements is difficult. If we are asking them to do something that is already difficult for them, it needs to be an extra motivating task! Consider how typically developing students react when they are faced with something that is hard to do. They may hesitate to get started and may think about if the activity is worth the work. Bottom line, the activity needs to be incredibly motivating to our students, especially if they are going to take a risk and attempt to physically respond in a manner that is already hard.

2. Offer Choices for Multiple Cycles

Before any of us make choices, we usually like to hear all options multiple times before deciding what we want. It is important to do the same with our students. Repeat the choices multiple times so that they have time to really think about what they want. Offering them choices in multiple cycles may give them more time to organize their body to make a response. If students don't make a selection after a couple cycles, offer them a reminder and model what you want them to do.

3. Offer Choices in a Consistent Order: Support a Visual, Auditory and/or Tactual Map

Students with significant disabilities typically have poor reaction time, making it difficult to respond instantly when they hear or see what they want. When choices are being presented and our students are unsure of what is coming next, this may increase their anticipation level, often resulting in increased tone and poorer reaction time. Offering the choices multiple times and in the same order helps to decrease the stress level as students will start to learn when and where the choices are going to show up. Each time you offer a cycle of choices, repeat them in the same order, pausing between each one.

4. Always Include a Way Out

Frequently, students may not respond to the choices. Their lack of response may again be perceived as an inability to make choices, when it may be due to the simple fact that they don't want any of our choices or they are finished. When listing choices, always include a way for the student to tell you that they don't want any of the choices, for example: "none of these," "something else," or "not what I want." If the student selects any of these, offer "finished" as a choice before listing a new set of choices.

5. Decrease the Amount of Questions & Language

Students with significant disabilities are at serious risk of developing prompt dependency. Asking a lot of questions and adding a lot of prompts during partner assisted scanning (i.e., is it this…?, do you want…?, did you mean…?, hit your switch to tell me…) may limit the opportunities for our students to problem solve and initiate. Additionally, many have processing difficulties. It may be helpful to decrease the amount of questions used and simply offer the choices to the student. Decreasing the amount of extra talk/input will give them a chance to focus on the choices, consider them, and to focus on organizing their body to make a response. Compare the differences in input.

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Scenario 1: "Sarah, it's reading time. Tell me who you want to read with."
"Do you want read a book on the computer by yourself? Hit your switch to tell me."
"Do you want to read with your buddy group in the book corner?"
"Tell me-do you want to read with Miss Ann?"
"Do you want to read with Sam? I'm not sure what you want. You need to hit your switch."

Scenario 2: "Sarah, it's reading time. Tell me who you want to read with.
"By myself"   (pause)
"Miss Ann"   (pause)
"Buddy group"   (pause)
"Sam"   (pause)
"More choices"   (pause) Cycle through 2-3 times.
Other Bonus: Listing the choices in a simple format is a way to begin working on auditory scanning.

6. Consider How Choices Are Offered: Visual, Auditory, Tactual and/or Sign

Students with significant disabilities often have visual and/or auditory processing difficulties. They may have difficulty focusing on multiple, simultaneous modes of input. Offer choices in the mode(s) that are easiest for your student to process. Download a handout about cortical vision impairment and students who are struggling to communicate from www.lburkhart.com.

7. Accept Multiple Communication Modes

Many students with significant disabilities need to learn how to use switches. Partner assisted scanning is a great way to work on switch use when plugged into single message and/or listing devices. When learning to use 2 switches, one device can be programmed with a message to get you to go to the next choice, i.e. "not!!!, not that," 'no way," or "I don't want it." The second device can be programmed with a way for students to indicate their choice when it is presented, i.e. "that's it," "that's the one," or "I like that one."   When using 1 switch, the device can be programmed with the latter comments. Very often, students' motor skills break down and it is difficult for them to use their switches. To support students in learning how to make choices, allow students to use the easiest mode of communication to indicate a selection, i.e. smile, frown, vocalization, and/or body movement. Requiring a specific mode of response may result in student frustration, ultimately decreasing their desire to make a choice.

8. Attribute Meaning to All Communication Attempts

During partner assisted scanning, student attempts may be random and not purposeful as this is a time when they are *learning* how to make choices. Similar to what we would do with typical children, partners should avoid testing students about their intention, and instead attribute meaning and talk, talk, talk about any attempts they make. Providing this kind of feedback offers cognitive clarity about what they have done. Giving students a better understanding of what they have done and what is expected also helps them develop a smoother motor plan.

9. Use Facilitation Strategies as Needed

Many of our students have significant motor challenges. Identifying some simple strategies to facilitate physical movement can make students become more successful in motor learning. Dale Gardner Fox MS, RPT has some essential pointers for supporting and guiding movements. Download the handout from www.lburkhart.com.

10. Consider the Implications of Life As A Multiple Choice Test

Partner assisted scanning is essentially a multiple-choice format. While it is needed, exclusive use of this mode of communication does not allow students to learn to be generative. Be sure to offer activities at other times of the day where student can learn to explore and produce their own things, such as the use of a dedicated AAC system or "scribbling" or experimenting with the entire alphabet.