

# Communication Points

## Communication Pioneers

### *What we have learned from Helen and Annie*

Of the many things Helen Keller taught us in her extraordinary lifetime, perhaps the most overlooked achievement is what she taught us about communication competence. Or, at least that's what her teacher Annie Sullivan taught us. And in that regard, it's tough to say who was more brilliant—Annie for figuring out a way to communicate with Helen or Helen for possessing within her a spirit that could not be repressed by her disabilities. Annie earned the title, "The Miracle Worker," and indeed that's appropriate given her accomplishments. But the "miracle" was not that Annie twitched her nose like Samantha on *Bewitched* so that Helen could communicate but that she figured out a means with which to unlock communication for Helen.

Now granted, Helen Keller did not have an intellectual disability, but had Annie Sullivan not presented Helen with consistent and persistent communication intervention, no one would have ever known how brilliant Helen was. What's more, Helen would have lived a life unable to express herself beyond grunts and cries. Think about that for

a minute. Think of yourself as someone without a means to express not only the most basic of intents but the wide range of thoughts, concerns, joys, humor, questions, curiosities, and all of the other emotions and ideas that we express through the gift of communication.

That's not to suggest that every student who currently lacks a communication system is a Helen Keller in waiting any more than any given student in a general education classroom is the next Albert Einstein or Madame Curie. That's not the point, but...you never know.

As you heard and saw in your state's Community of Practice orientation meeting, communication competence is a key focus of the NCSC GSEG. It's not only the key, it's the hinge and the door itself because without it, the path to accessing academic content is blocked. And yet, we know that figuring out the communication systems for students who require complex support systems isn't the easiest thing to do. And so if you or someone you know has a student whose communication needs have you scratching your head, don't give up. And don't feel like you're not a good teacher. Hopefully, as we work together, we will see the power of consistent and persistent communication intervention just as Annie did.

## Calling all Miracle Workers: *Send us your success stories!*

Have you ever had a student with challenging communication needs? You know, the one that has you scratching your head trying to figure out what to do. Did your innovative intervention(s)

"work a miracle" for your student? If so, we want to hear from you. Please send your story (just a couple of paragraphs in length) to [mindy.rodin@uky.edu](mailto:mindy.rodin@uky.edu) so that we may share it with other teachers.

# Communities of Practice

## Definitions and clarifications

One of the major responsibilities of Work Group 3 (Professional Development group) is to establish a Community of Practice in each state. What exactly is a **Community of Practice (CoP)**? According to Wikipedia, a CoP is “a group of people who share a craft and/or a profession... It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally.” The term was coined by Etienne Wenger in 1991, but this type of learning has existed for as long as people have been sharing their experiences. In order to be a CoP, three components are necessary: *domain*, *community*, and *practice*. In the context of CoP’s, a *domain* is a shared interest among the participants; *community* is the members engaging in joint activities and discussions, helping each other, and sharing information, and *practice* is the shared resources that are implemented as practice.

Some schools have established Professional Learning Communities as a way for their teachers to learn and collaborate. A **Professional Learning Community (PLC)** is an extended learning opportunity to foster collaborative learning among colleagues within a particular work environment or field. It is often used in schools as a way to organize teachers into working groups ([www.wikipedia.org](http://www.wikipedia.org)). In order for it to be a PLC, there needs to be a focus on learning, build a collaborative culture, and be results oriented.

You may be asking yourself, what is the difference between the two? A CoP focuses on “doing” things together or in the practical application of knowledge

while a PLC focuses on the “learning” that occurs within the group.

Sometimes, people will use the terms CoP and PLC interchangeably. While there are subtle differences between the two, there are many similarities. Both consist of people working together to achieve a shared goal. Both promote a sense of collegiality and help teachers become more effective. Additionally, both CoP’s and PLC’s require hard work and commitment from their members as they learn to improve their practice and become more effective in their work with students. The staff at NCSC recognizes that our CoP members have this dedication and commitment, and we look forward to learning together as we improve educational outcomes for all students.

## CoP: Roles and Expectations

Now that we’ve had time to review the information from the CoP orientation meeting through our first webinar, you may be wondering, “What am I supposed to be *doing* as a member of the NCSC CoP?” By reading this newsletter, you are “doing” one of the activities. You are engaging in a joint activity with other CoP members in your state and across the country. Hopefully, you can find the information useful and can use it to inform your interactions with both students and your co-workers. During this first year of our grant, the biggest expectation of the CoP members is to view the webinars, complete the study guides, and participate in the live chats with your state lead and other CoP members in your state. Additionally, we need your feedback on the webinars to help us fine-tune and polish the information and delivery. So, it may not seem like much, but your activities are already critical to our success.

# The Times They Are A-Changing...Again

***As your body grows bigger, your mind grows flowers. It's great to learn 'cause knowledge is power!***

Thus was the beginning of every catchy Saturday morning interlude from the folks of School House Rock, who punctuated our Saturday morning adventures of Tom and Jerry, Bugs Bunny and the Roadrunner, and Scooby Doo and Shaggy so that we could be entertained by catchy little ditties that might also teach us something about multiplication, science, grammar, or American history in the process.

## ***Knowledge is power...***

And for the past couple of decades, there has been a series of public service announcements on TV, each featuring a celebrity like Malcolm Jamal-Warner or Betty White who deliver a message about drug prevention or youth mentoring, with the tag line, "The More You Know..." as a shooting star slides across the screen.

## ***The More You Know...***

The fact is, though, that knowledge is not powerful unless it is accompanied by action. It doesn't matter how much you know; what matters is how you use that information.

Information is more accessible now than it has ever been, and there is a focus on lifelong learning, continued education, and professional development. Still, many people and businesses fail to progress. Why? Well, perhaps they fail to put their knowledge

## ***Recommendations for you:***

<http://www.communicationmatrix.org>

The Communication Matrix is an assessment tool designed to pinpoint exactly how an individual is communicating and to provide a framework for determining logical communication goals. You can use this tool to document the expressive communication skills of children who have severe or multiple disabilities, including children with sensory, motor and cognitive impairments.

into action.

It's no big secret that change is scary, and often when we learn new information, what we're faced with is the reality that we're going to have to change some things. And even if our current state of affairs isn't ideal, it's at least comfortable: we know it and we have learned to live with it.

Educators have often complained, and rightly so, that change in education swings like a pendulum. Buzzwords, fad programs, and flavor-of-the-month gadgets keep us running back and forth. Yet, the very nature of education has to do with learning how to navigate change—how to take knowledge and utilize it.

As we dive deeper into our work with the NCSC GSEG, try to think of ways you can take the information you're learning and use it to make changes that will positively impact your students and yourselves. It is one thing to attend a conference or sit through a webinar; it is another to put that information into practice. Professional development of any kind is worthless without a willingness and openness to take the knowledge provided, put it into play, and see what happens. Seeds seldom grow unless they are first planted, then watered, and finally cultivated.

**Communication Corner:** If you cannot honor the student's communication request, at least *acknowledge* the intent. Think back to the video of Hunter and how his teacher consistently *acknowledged* his desire to talk about Blue's Clues but kept him on task by "talking" about calendar.