

# Developing active communication skills: Royal College Manchester

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**URN:** 139218

**Region:** North West

**Remit:** Further education and skills

## Provider background

[Royal College Manchester](#) (RCM) is an independent specialist residential and day college that caters for students with severe and complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities. There are a number of learners with autistic spectrum condition and multisensory impairment; all learners have communication needs and many present with challenging behaviour. The college is part of the Seashell Trust and is located on a large site in Cheadle, Manchester, which it shares with Royal School Manchester.

## Brief description

[Royal College Manchester](#) provides interdisciplinary support for its students, including assistive technology, that helps them make excellent progress in developing their active communication skills. This includes developing their ability to exercise choice, express their opinions and engage in learning. A wide range of highly individualised communication strategies is used very flexibly in different learning contexts. An outstanding range of highly interactive learning opportunities across the curriculum help students to engage actively, develop their communication skills and extend their range of communication partners.

The [effective development](#) of their communication skills reduces the students' anxiety levels and frustration and increases their ability to better manage their own behaviour.

## The good practice in detail

The college is unique in its focus on, and specialism in, active communication. All students at RCM are either non-verbal communicators or have very limited functional verbal communication skills and require augmentative and alternative communication systems. Attending RCM may be the first time that a young person has received this

level and type of communication support. Many students at the college have had limited or no regular speech and language therapy in previous settings. Other students have tried a picture communication system but with little reported success.

The college has an on-site interdisciplinary team that has the skills to assess and meet students' specific needs identified at entry. The team includes a range of specialists, including speech and language therapists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and an audiologist. The educational team includes well-qualified, skilled and experienced teaching and learning support staff. A full-time, assistive technologist works with the therapy and education staff to implement practical communication solutions. The interdisciplinary team works together, very effectively, to assess and establish a formal communication system tailored to support the development of each student's expressive and receptive skills and to increase their independence. Continuing professional development and high expectations are strong values underpinning our communication strategy.

'We observe a direct link between the growth in students' active communication skills and independence and a reduction in challenging behaviour. This gives students increased opportunities to participate in both college and community activities and, for an increasing number of students, progression into supported employment.'

*Bernie White, Head of College*

A critical component of the college's success is establishing a culture of high expectations to support the organisation's ambitions for students through its strategic plan and core values. Its core [values](#) provide a framework for all college activities, staff behaviours and professional development:

- Respect for everyone
- Aspiration to be the best
- Integrity through words and actions
- Trust everyone
- Collaborate through involvement

Katherine Corey, Deputy Head, emphasises, 'It is important to remember that active communication skills do not come naturally to students with complex learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Therefore, we need to [teach them these skills](#) and provide [well-planned opportunities](#) to practise them. In order to achieve this, we need to engineer the environment through timetable management and very effective use of natural opportunities. Teaching has to be facilitated in discrete sessions through enjoyable and creative activities so that the students want to engage actively in communicating with staff initially, and then with peers. We need structured, ongoing planning to enable developing skills to be transferred into every relevant context: home, work, community and friendship.'

The college was restructured to support the strategic plan in September 2012. The revised structure established specialist roles, including a new assistive technologist. The therapy team was integrated into the college structure from its previously centralised role in the Trust. Middle managers were appointed within the education teams who had specific responsibilities and specialist knowledge around student learning and support needs. Champion roles were created in the learning support team based on priority areas, including communication, technology and behaviour. This provided ground-level support and challenge for all staff to create an active communication environment for all students to participate and develop their communication skills. The whole restructure emphasised RCM's philosophy that specialist support needed to be integrated within the college life.

The key elements that need to be in place to create and sustain an active communication environment, include:

- a clear [communications policy](#) and structure
- a well-qualified and experienced on-site specialist support team that includes a speech and language therapist, an occupational therapist, an assistive technologist and a behaviour coordinator
- interdisciplinary planning of [strategies](#) for each student
- training for staff and families around the implementation of the students' individual strategies
- expertise in the development of different communication strategies and interactive approaches, including sign language, picture communication systems, minimal spoken language, electronic communication aids and objects of reference
- empathy with students springing from an insight into the challenges associated with those with communication difficulties, including autism and sensory impairment
- staff understanding of the connection between communication and behaviour
- staff ability to use the relevant communication strategies skilfully for each student
- regular review of communication strategies for individual students
- planned space and opportunity within the learning programme to promote active communication skills and to apply these in a range of settings
- embedded monitoring of the quality of support for active communication within the observation process, as well as for improving teaching and learning
- a problem-solving approach for identifying and sourcing assistive technology tools to facilitate active communication

- ongoing comprehensive training and development, including specialist teaching and support qualifications and a programme that continues to develop the understanding and specialist skills of learning support staff.

## The assistive technologist role

Matt Daly, assistive technologist, clarifies his role as 'enabling students to do, something they could not do before, through the use of technology. I act as a bridge between the therapy team, the information technology (IT) department and the teaching and support team. My role is to remove barriers to communication by turning ideas into practical applications and supporting the development of individual student strategies'.

Matt believes that the following are critical features of a successful assistive technologist role:

- **Adapting current equipment creatively to meet students' individual needs** - for example, RCM uses two different coloured switches to represent 'yes' and 'no' to create a voting board for students on particular subjects. When votes have been cast, the group counts up the number of 'yes' and 'no' votes to determine the decision.
- **Identifying and using the best of the computers' mainstream technologies** - making use of the different types of tablet and mobile technologies available. Using software that can be readily adapted to meet individual students' needs.
- **Networking widely and developing an infrastructure to identify equipment that can be used** - the network of assistive technologists and related professionals is growing and is highly effective for sharing experience, knowledge and information on available software, apps and hardware; talking to those who have knowledge of students' past successes and failures in the use of low- and high-tech communication systems.
- **Be aware of and tap into developing technologies:** by reading blogs, attending technology events and subscribing to publications.
- **Developing an infrastructure of equipment** - for example developing assessment kits so that students can try new technology and be assessed without having to wait to loan or purchase equipment. RCM has a bank of different tablet computers, an eye gaze system and numerous different switches and mounts.
- **Ongoing assessment** – once a solution has been found for a student, it is important to continue the assessment process. By being in constant contact with the students in the range of different contexts, you can assess and identify their needs, preferred methods and motivations to communicate.
- **Gaining full support from the organisation** – it's important to have the strategic support and financial backing to be able to purchase a range of equipment to carry out the role flexibly. An integrated model enables

interdisciplinary working across departments and clear understanding of roles.

## Impact on students of an integrated approach to active communication

### Students leading learning

Several years ago, tutorials were teacher-led, with students sitting and listening. One day, one of the students made his way to the computer and took control of the registration process on the interactive board. He did this every morning, and told the teacher which student was next to register. Eventually, he asked the teacher to sit at the computer while he led the registration of the group.

Gradually, a second student in the group established his role by taking control of the computer, while the other student directed the registration and tutorial activities. The teacher sat with the group during this process.

Now, the students work in harmony to deliver the tutorial. Through this, both students have developed their communication skills and interaction with peers. The first student uses his sign language to talk to the group about how they feel and has redesigned the font and picture size on the interactive board. The second student now independently controls the interactive PowerPoint, finding and opening the correct documents. His verbal and communication skills have improved significantly during the tutorials.

### **Use of voice output technology**

Staff observed a student showing interest in a peer's use of a speech output communication device. The student has little speech and used a communication strategy involving symbols, photographs, emergent writing, signing and gesture.

Staff and therapists trialled the use of a tablet computer and voice output software with the student in his college and community sessions. The student can now navigate through all the communication apps, identifying the ones that are relevant to his session, needs and communication. He now uses his tablet computer and software to communicate his feelings and his successes. He uses it successfully in college café and snack sessions to add and calculate money and the required change.

Recently, he applied for a trip to South Africa as part of the 'Journey of a Lifetime' young people's adventure society. In the interview, he provided relevant information, in response to questions, as to why he was a suitable candidate for the trip.

His skills have developed significantly, including those of communication, self-advocacy and decision-making.

### Communicating effectively

A student on the autistic spectrum who is non-verbal and has severe learning difficulties likes to travel weekly to a major sandwich vendor in a nearby town. He progressed from needing staff support to order his sandwich to pointing to his choice of fillings, to using his tablet computer with voice output software to order his sandwich independently. Over time, his coping skills and self-confidence increased.

On one occasion, the shop was busy and the server was reluctant to listen to what he wanted. The student had used his tablet computer to give clear and specific instructions for his sandwich. The server spoke to his support assistant, ignoring the student, then began building the sandwich in a different way to the request. This irritated the student. However, he stayed calm, vocalised and waved at the server to get his attention and then pointed to the tablet to reinforce his order. When the server placed five cheese triangles on the sandwich, the student vocalised and held up four fingers to emphasise his choice. When he was still ignored, he retyped 'four cheese triangles' and pressed the voice button. Eventually, he got his requested order and paid for his food. The shop was still very crowded but the student communicated appropriately at all times, remaining calm but assertive.

The fact that the student remained calm yet assertive is a huge step forward and partly a result of being able to communicate less frustratingly

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