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FORUM NOTE



Lessons for the AAC field: a tribute to Dr. David Beukelman

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ABSTRACT

On February 5, 2022, the field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) lost a giant when Dr. David “Dave” Beukelman passed away. As the readership of this journal is aware, Dave was one of the principal founders of the AAC field and devoted his career to providing a voice to those without one. Before AAC became a field, people who could not talk were invisible or seldom noticed, unless they were in the way. For more than 40 years, he was a catalyst for change in AAC clinical practice, research, dissemination, teaching, and public policy development. This tribute aims to honor Dave’s lifelong mission of serving others by sharing some of his most timeless and valued lessons. Each lesson begins with one of Dave’s most enduring quotes that is then followed by a brief synopsis of the lesson Dave hoped to convey.

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On February 5, 2022, the field of augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) lost a giant when Dr. David “Dave” Beukelman passed away (see [Figure 1](#)). Dave was born in Harrison, South Dakota on January 13, 1943. He attended a one-room country school, graduated from Corsica High School, and attended Northwestern College in Orange City, Iowa before graduating from Western Michigan University with a degree in speech language pathology. Dave received masters and doctorate degrees from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He worked at Minnesota State University, Mankato, and then took a position as Director of Communication Disorders at the University of Washington Hospital in Seattle, where he worked for 10 years. In 1985, he was appointed Barkley Professor of Communication Disorders at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and the University of Nebraska Medical Center-Omaha. From 1985 to 2020, he was also a clinical research collaborator at Madonna Rehabilitation Hospital in Lincoln. Dave was the third Editor of the AAC journal from 1994 to 1997 and was also coauthor of all five editions of the best-known AAC textbook in North America and elsewhere (Beukelman & Mirenda, 1992/1998, 2002/2005, 2013; currently, Beukelman & Light, 2020). He also played a leadership role for more than 20 years in the Rehabilitation Engineering

Research Center on Augmentative and Alternative Communication (RERC on AAC), where he helped to spearhead a wide range of research, development, training, and dissemination activities.

As the readership of this journal is aware, Dave was one of the principal founders of the AAC field and devoted his career to providing a voice to those without one. Before AAC became a field, people who could not talk were invisible or seldom noticed, unless they were in the way. They were talked *about* but not talked *to* (Musselwhite & St. Louis, 1988) and they were often assumed to be less than sentient (Tavalaro & Tayson, 1997). Where others saw nothing at all—or saw furniture (Musselwhite & St. Louis, 1988), objects (Joseph, 1986), vegetables (Dominique-Bauby, 1997) or even beasts (Ohio Department of Health Services, 1988; Bergner, 2008) Dave saw *people*. A visionary and a pioneer, Dave recognized that people with complex communication needs (CCN) required access to the kind of life that effective communication offers, and that others needed to see—and hear from—them (Beukelman, 1990a). To realize this vision, there was an urgent need for a range of communication strategies and tools, and for a network of clinicians and university faculty committed to learning from and listening to individuals with CCN and their families/caregivers.



Figure 1. Dr. David “Dave” Beukelman January 13, 1943–February 5, 2022. (c) Helen Beukelman

Dave acted strategically on his vision. For more than 40 years, he was a catalyst for change in AAC clinical practice, research, dissemination, teaching, and public policy development. He gave so much to so many, but he would be the first to say that he received at least as much. More than just *seeing* people with CCN, Dave *learned* from them. Much of his work focused on amplifying the voices of individuals who were unable to speak in order to emphasize their centrality to the field. Every year, he introduced university students to AAC by having them watch and listen to “How far We’ve Come, How Far We Have to Go: Tales From the AAC Trenches,” a webcast by Michael Williams, a long-time practitioner of the art of augmented communication (see <https://vimeo.com/640852351>). Recounting an observation during a research planning meeting, Dave wrote, in a personal communication:

I observed Michael at breakfast, seated at a table close to the area where guests lined up for the breakfast buffet. On this weekend, the hotel hosted many middle school students and their families. I watched Michael visit with these young people as they waited in line. I realized that as their families ate breakfast together, the primary discussion topic was the guy who talked to them with his computer. Later, I realized that just a few months earlier, Michael had written the following to others who rely on AAC: “Every time you step out of your home, cruise down the street, catch the eye of a stranger, make a purchase, attend a ball game, or say hello to a child, you are making a significant change in the expectations the world has of augmented communicators”. (Williams et al., 2008)

Dave understood that leadership and learning go hand-in-hand, and that the AAC field would always require a “big tent”—one large enough to be welcoming to people who rely on AAC and their families, as well to as clinicians, university faculty, students, researchers, advocates, developers, manufacturers, organizations, technology companies, and policy makers. This tribute aims to honor Dave’s lifelong mission of serving others by sharing some of his most timeless and valued lessons. Each lesson begins with one of Dave’s most enduring quotes, which is then followed by a brief synopsis of the lesson Dave hoped to convey.

“It’s all about communication—connecting people with each other”

Dave always carried a little black book with him and encouraged his colleagues and students to do the same. His book was crammed with insights that he gleaned from readings, conferences, meetings with students, conversations with colleagues, and interactions with individuals who rely on AAC and their families. Almost 30 years ago, he wrote in his book “It’s all about communication—connecting people with each other,” then underlined it twice. Dave understood that communication is essential to our lives as human beings, for it is only through communication that we can express needs and wants, share information, and most importantly, build social closeness with others. Dave realized the devastating impact when people with CCNs do not have access to effective channels of communication. He frequently quoted an individual with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) who said, “Speechlessness is not a loss of life, but a loss of access to life” (Beukelman & Garrett, 1988; p. 104).

Dave knew that the end goal was communication participation via any means possible and he advocated for individuals with CCNs to use AAC systems not only to answer basic questions but also to participate in typical activities in their families, at school, at work, and in the community. He carefully documented multimodal AAC interventions for people with a wide range of conditions—interventions that might include the use of natural speech, gestures, drawing, written choices, photographs or other memorabilia, low tech communication books, and/or AAC technologies with onscreen keyboards or visual scene displays (e.g., Blackstone et al., 2015; Simmons-Mackie et al., 2013). Frequently, Dave reminded us that building connections between people requires more than access to words—it also requires ways to communicate feelings and emotions like “stay with me,” “respect me,” “love me,” and “I like you,” and even “buzz off.” Using the metaphor of playing piano, in which the right hand plays the melody and the left hand sets the harmony and tone, Dave explained, “There are some things you just can’t say with your right hand” (Beukelman, 1989; p. 257). Dave urged us to remember that communication and human connection can be achieved in many ways—not just via traditional channels of spoken communication. In 1988, he reflected on a Paralympic swim meet that he attended with his son Jonathan, and he shared his son’s observation of a participant whose swimming technique was atypical, “She was setting a world’s record and we thought she was drowning, right Dad?” (Beukelman, 1988; p. 122). As always, in sharing this anecdote, Dave reminded us to look beyond the surface to find the deeper meaning: What is important is not the degree to which a communicator’s system conforms to the rules of spoken interactions, but rather the degree to which it allows an individual to access life and connect with others.

“When you have a hammer, everything looks like a nail”

Dave recognized the danger of narrow, either/or approaches to communication intervention, as reflected in this title of a

Forum article he wrote for the AAC journal (Beukelman, 1987). In that piece, he cautioned, “We cannot afford to have our judgements influenced excessively by the tendency to view either the AAC or the speech approach as the sole solution to serve persons with severe communication disorders. Rather, we should provide balanced intervention services that meet our client’s communication needs given their profile of present and potential capabilities” (p. 96). Although Dave wrote this over 35 years ago, the struggle continues to play out in many clinical arenas where AAC is too often seen as a last resort rather than part of a continuum of communication supports. In contrast, Dave encouraged a balanced approach that brings together all stakeholders to develop a comprehensive, personalized communication system specific to the needs of the individual—a system that continues to grow, evolve, and change over time. His focus on personalized intervention led to the development of the Participation Model, which is now recognized as the predominant model for AAC service provision (see Beukelman & Light, 2020 for details). The Participation Model is rooted in the belief that AAC supports should be designed to meet the needs and skills of the communicator rather than forcing the communicator to fit the requirements of the AAC system. As Dave explained, “Just as no two people are alike . . . , so too should no two AAC interventions for individuals with CCN be identical. Rather each individual requires a unique constellation of unaided and aided AAC, selected and personalized to meet his or her unique needs, capabilities, experiences, interests, culture, and identity” (Beukelman & Light, 2020; pp. 269, 285). Dave often stressed that the goal of any AAC intervention is to meet an individual’s communication needs today, while planning for tomorrow. The key is to determine what works best for the individual.

“Be sure to give me credit, Dad”

In an AAC journal editorial (Beukelman, 1990b), Dave reflected on the fact that, when he gave presentations, he often referred to observations and comments made by his youngest son Jonathan, who frequently reminded his father to give him due credit. In fact, Jonathan did not have to remind Dave about this at all—Dave was the ultimate credit-giver, collaborator, and practitioner-scholar. Virtually all of his research originated from clinical experiences or interactions with people who relied on AAC or their family members—they were at the center of everything he did. When he encountered an AAC challenge, he recruited the people required to solve it—clinicians, educators, software developers, engineers, whomever—and made them feel that they, and only they, could contribute the one missing piece that was needed. An AAC solution doesn’t exist yet? No problem—let’s put our heads together to invent it—from a Morse Code emulator to a safe laser pointer to visual scenes display software, and more. Dave was like an orchestra conductor who understood that the result of any AAC intervention is only as good as each player’s individual contribution, and he delighted in helping the members of his AAC orchestra play their best to succeed. Despite the visibility of his

role as an AAC conductor, Dave eschewed the spotlight himself and took great pleasure in acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of his current and former students, clinical collaborators, coauthors, and research colleagues. After he was called to the stage to receive a plaque naming him a Fellow of the International Society for AAC at the 2018 convention in Toronto, he shook his finger at those of us who nominated him, clearly uncomfortable at this public recognition of his work. Dave was a humble collaborator who never lost sight of the fact that, “... our research and clinical focus must be guided by an abiding awareness of the “magic” that attracted us to the AAC field in the beginning—to assist persons who cannot speak to “talk” and persons who cannot “write” to place words on paper” (Beukelman, 1990a, p. 161).

“The weakest ink is mightier than the strongest memory”

In the inaugural issue of the AAC journal, Dave wrote a thoughtful editorial in which he challenged the field to develop a literature base that did not exist at the time—one that matched the research, technological, and intervention innovations that then existed in the emerging field of AAC (Beukelman, 1985). In short, he urged us to write down what we do and what we believe. Reviewing the many editorials he wrote over the next decade confirms the importance of this written record. If Dave had not taken the time to write down his message, his words would have faded or become a distant memory; now, we can reflect on his guidance as we map the future.

For many of us, writing is not easy—it is a solitary, mundane, often stressful task that must compete with many other aspects of life. In another editorial, entitled, “Scholarly Writing: Managing the Competition for Time and Attention,” Dave proposed a unique way of framing our work as professional writers (Beukelman, 1999). He suggested that we move away from deadline-driven writing to a lifestyle-driven approach wherein writing becomes part of one’s daily schedule. Dave was a living model of this advice—he scheduled daily times, typically limited in duration but in the early morning, when his office door was closed and he did nothing but write. This lifestyle choice was fundamental to his ability to author many influential textbooks, research manuscripts, and editorials.

Despite the discipline, courage, and perseverance that writing demands, it is required for the ongoing development of the AAC field. In an editorial entitled, “On the Shoulders of Those Who Have Gone Before,” Dave emphasized how important the written word is to students who use this mode of communication as the foundation of future inquiry, noting that text “waits patiently” (Beukelman, 1995, p. 1) for future scholars to find it. Hopefully, future generations will take up Dave’s mantle and document their work in written form, to continue to build the knowledge base and advance the field.

“Peel the onion”

Student mentoring was an essential part of Dave’s mission to ensure that individuals who rely on AAC always have someone in their corner. One of the key lessons every Beukelman mentee learned is an analogy that Dave called “peeling the onion.” He knew of the tendency of most students to design studies that are overly ambitious and that often fail to build on previous research. He used the analogy to help students design studies that were “research-able,” by asking them to envision the layers of an onion that have to be peeled off in order to reach the onion’s core. In the analogy, each layer represents a research question that has to be answered before the next layer can be addressed, toward the ultimate goal of answering the core “big question.” This analogy is tremendously useful outside of research as well, whenever there is a deadline or a large project looming. It is a reminder to take a deep breath and “peel the onion,” in order to get to the core of the matter—layer by layer.

Dave’s mentoring did not end when a student graduated; it was a lifelong commitment. He was so happy when one of his former students told him about a successful AAC intervention, published a research article, or accomplished a goal that he knew was important to them. As a mentor, Dave also had an uncanny ability to help his mentees find work-life balance. He often used the phrase, “Good enough,” to remind his mentees when it was time to move on—to the next meeting, to the next project, to meet family obligations, to have fun. He created a community of mentees who were supported both by him and by one another. He urged the members of this community to “Guard yourselves and your missions, support and encourage one another, and don’t get snarky before your time” (Beukelman, 2018; location 1897). Dave’s mentees will remember him for his kind heart and for his commitment to support their professional lives as well as their mental well-being and the integrity of their families.

His spirit lives in all of Us

These are just a few of the many lessons that Dave shared over the years. They provide a small glimpse into his vision of a world where individuals with CCN have access to effective means of communication and are able to participate fully in society. Dave’s spirit resounds in the AAC literature; in classrooms where AAC is taught; in universities, clinics, and schools where AAC interventions take place; and in every person who knew and worked with him. Dave embodied and emboldened the field of AAC. His life touched every aspect of our mission and influenced the work we have done and must continue to do. His family described him as “...an intellect with a humble heart bent toward serving others” (Beukelman Family, 2022)—a description that perfectly describes his contributions to AAC. Dave saw and supported potential, believed in people, and acted in ways that mattered.

We miss you, Dave. Thank you for your kindness, knowledge, and wisdom; you have left an extraordinary legacy for us to carry forward. B4N (Bye for now).

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