Moving Beyond Mere Exchanges: Engagement, Participation and Meaning-making

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Although the AAC community and manufacturers have made great strides in the past 40 years, there is a growing awareness that technology on its own is not enough to ensure meaningful interactions between AAC users and their communication partners. The ability to push a button to activate a speech message is necessary but not sufficient to engage in meaning-making with others. As we know, the mere physical presence of a communication partner also does not guarantee social closeness.

Traditionally we have used Light's (1989) definition of communication competence which focuses on linguistic, strategic, social and pragmatic competence. Although a useful definition, these different competencies distract from a more wholistic understanding of the outcomes of communication as a process of developing meaning with another. Meaning-making occurs when two individuals engage in a creative process of interpreting and sending symbols in interaction. The focus is therefore on what happens between two people rather on the behavior of the individual communication partners.

This presentation will focus on the importance of social closeness in every day interactions by addressing the following questions:

1. What is meaning-making?
2. How do we understand the level of meaning-making between people?
3. What are the components of meaning-making?

Different levels of meaning-making will be described in relation to two components of meaning-making, i.e. engagement and participation. This approach acknowledges participation in activities, but emphasizes the need to differentiate between participation and engagement in interactions. Some guidelines in enhancing meaning-making in interaction will be demonstrated by using real life applications.