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Communicator

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Baby see, baby do

Andrew Peck's interactions with a pair of very young learners shed some light on minimalistic communication.

My house is often a little bit hectic. The rest of the time it's completely out of control, largely due to a combination of puppy, toddler and tolerant parenting. The boy's favourite toy is a pink toy vacuum cleaner that rattles when pushed – it's his height and was intended for a much taller child – while the pup's is a squeaky bone. The boy loves to stamp on the bone to summon the pup before chasing her, rattling screaming and shrieking through a house that never feels quite big enough to hold all the noise.

The child is an interesting case study for a technical communicator. He is an '*ideal user*', unfettered by preconception or old habits. As a communicator he appears limited to short squeals and grunts and mime, but there's also the speed of his waddle and facial expressions to take into account. What lessons can technical communicators learn from such a '*back to basics*' approach?

Names and places

The boy has quite a large glossary of words he can understand; this is inferred from the ease with which he interprets instructions and races to the next named place and task. He only has distinctive utterances for people (including the '*daawgu*'), bath, vacuum cleaner, music, chocolate and biscuit. The terms he uses reflect his wants and interests rather than the views of '*the management*'.

The lesson here is that when writing and planning documentation, ask the person who's going to be using it what they need to know and write for them in their vocabulary rather than solely consulting a distant SME (Subject Matter Expert).

Accessibility

Things like locked doors, spelling '*B-A-T-H*', and storage tubs confound the small child. If he wants a tub opening, he'll bring it to an adult and mime opening it in what, if captured on film, is a brilliant illustration of exactly how to position hands for lifting a lid.

While words may not (yet) be something he has in large supply, at 18 months of age, the boy is a competent mime, meaning that he can communicate past the speech barrier. He's even learning the hand signals we use with the pup.

As technical communicators, we need to consider a holistic picture of users. They usually know what they want to do, they are just lacking the skills or knowledge to do it. A challenging process should be communicated in a way that is as accessible and clear as possible.

Consequences

The boy is fascinated by food and watches meals being prepared. He has miniature saucepans to '*cook*' with. He sits and happily stirs air, or dry cereal while pretending that he's one of the big people making a meal.

His ability to copy what he sees has interesting (slightly worrying) consequences. He had started to take his mini pan, ceremoniously lift it over his head, and standing on tip-toes, hoist it onto the hob in the kitchen. Needless to say plastic pans and heat don't tend to mix very well. For '*safety reasons*' I've had to buy him a plastic cooker that sits well away from the real thing.

Exemplar data in screenshots, photos or written examples should never lead to a situation in which harm can be done to real data, infrastructure or people. The design and presentation of sandbox data and training environments is often part of our remit. Users will copy what they see in diagrams and instructions and we should be wary of assuming what we consider '*common sense*' with some audiences.

Priorities

Most of the time the boy and puppy are comrades in arms against the forces of order, reason and parenthood but the boy is perfectly willing to turn informer.

The pup has learnt how to take advantage of gaps in the adult surveillance regime so it's helpful for the boy to summon us if she starts tucking in to a shoe or something else she shouldn't have. He'll come to us, declare '*daawgu*' and then lead the charge, finger pointed, hips gyrating, to the site of the misdemeanour… then he'll give himself a round of silent applause.

There are a few lessons from this: firstly that the important messages need to look important… the boy's hip waggle only happens when he's leading the way. In technical communications it might mean a different font or style for a warning. Secondly, there's again a sensible minimalism that says '*pointing is enough when you can see what I'm pointing at*'.

Reflection

Once a year I have to sit and watch a video on '*manual handling*'[1]. The video uses toddlers for all their demonstrations as they just '*do it right*' intuitively.

When we start to explore the developmental milestones made by children who are learning to communicate[2,3] we see that children have many habits of good technical communication: a clearly defined, limited vocabulary, simple syntax, the use of imagery and the ability to use multiple channels to convey a message.

Personally speaking, I think a good question to ask an instructor may not be '*tell it to me like I'm a 5-year-old*' but '*explain it like you're a 3-year-old*'. C

References

[1] Fun Manual Handling Safety Training Video! - Child's Play – Safety www.youtube.com/watch?v=MhGUkWAA9WM (accessed 1 February 2014)

[2] Communication Trust, *'Universally Speaking'* www.thecommunicationtrust.org.uk/media/2478/universally_speaking_-_early_years_web_version.pdf (accessed 1 February 2014)

[3] Crystal, D (1989). *Listen to Your Child: A Parent's Guide to Children's Language*, Penguin.

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