

Facilitated Communication

Is facilitated communication an amazing breakthrough which enables people previously without a voice to be heard? Or is it quackery, misleading at best and dangerous at worst? Controversy over this recent development has raged fiercely. Cautious scientists claim there is no evidence to support claims by protagonists. Practitioners castigate disbelievers as denying oppressed and vulnerable citizens their right to be heard.

In practice a person who has very limited communication sits in front of a keyboard such as a word processor, typewriter or Canon Communicator with a facilitator. The facilitator holds the person's hand over the keyboard and prompts the person, perhaps with a question. The physical prompt is intended to give the person confidence and help them get started. Typically the person's learns to press the keys with their index finger. As each keypress is made the facilitator calls out the letter. If the sequence of letters typed makes sense to the facilitator he/she reads the words and tries to check with the person that that was what was intended.

Sometimes the sequence of letters is a jumble which doesn't make sense. When it is effective there is a recognisable flow of words which do make sense. Some examples of communications are remarkable, even astonishing. People thought to be quite inarticulate and incapable of sensible communication are claimed to write moving poetry and otherwise convey their wishes and concerns.

A facilitator aims to fade physical prompting as the person's performance improves. The prompt may gradually be reduced to gently holding the elbow and eventually perhaps to resting a hand on the person's shoulder.

Validating communications

Controversy has arisen over how genuine facilitated communications are and who is originating them. Is it the person or the facilitator? It is not necessarily suggested that facilitators are deliberately faking messages. However, it is suggested that facilitators may unconsciously influence which keys are hit. As the finger hovers over an area of several keys, a facilitator may unwittingly guide the striking of one key rather than another.

There is a need for facilitators to be aware of the need to validate communications as part of the initial stages of working with each person. Procedures should be adopted to provide checks on whether communications are from the person or from the facilitator. Unfortunately, some facilitators are bowled over with what appears to be a breakthrough for a person. They are totally convinced of the veracity of the communications and fail to go through the mundane validity checks which are essential. This is likely to bring facilitated communication into disrepute. The danger is that it will be dismissed as on a level with Ouija board claims.

Allegations of abuse

Controversy is compounded when the content of communications is emotionally fraught. Allegations of abuse have often occurred (13% according to one commentator). People have been removed from their homes as a consequence, supposedly to protect them. Guidelines for responding to such allegations arising from facilitated communication are required as part of local procedures on abuse.

Conclusion

Facilitated communication does appear to be genuine with some people. However, it appears not to be genuine with others. Facilitated communication is not something to jump into without preparation. If facilitators are to avoid bringing it into disrepute they have a responsibility to establish the validity of communications for each person they work with early on in their facilitation relationship. Facilitation requires proper training and preparation including knowledge of pitfalls and how to establish the validity of communications.

Resources

Details of training in facilitated communication are available from: Communication Options, 5 Ingham Road, London NW6 1DG. ☎ 071 433 1146.

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