Recommendations to Educators on the Validation of Facilitated Communication

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Over the past several months the Institute has received letters and phone calls asking for advice on how to document (i.e. validate) students' facilitated communication. The inquiries often ask: "Is there a preferred methodology, test, or protocol for determining if a student is communicating? What does the Institute recommend?"

As most Digest readers know, many individuals have validated their facilitated communication in numerous research studies involving diverse approaches (see the article in this issue of the Digest entitled "Why Parents Should Have the Right to Use Facilitated Communication"). Yet for most of these individuals, the validation process is fragile, difficult, and sometimes inconsistent. Based on what we know from these studies, the considerations and strategies listed below provide a reasonable approach to helping students demonstrate their communicative abilities.

Considerations

It makes sense to think of validation or confirmation of authorship as a skill that facilitators, teachers, and others can help a person develop, through a collaborative process, rather than as a test.

The ability to confirm one's authorship of facilitated communication usually requires certain conditions, including supportive facilitators, friends, and teachers, many practice sessions, multiple validation type activities, and freedom to experience a trial-and-error approach. How a person performs, indeed whether a person performs at all, is at least as dependent on contextual factors (i.e. supportive conditions) as on personal characteristics.

Strategies

* Where appropriate, involve the student in planning activities. In many instances, particularly at the secondary level, students will take the lead in identifying skills on which to work, and approaches which capitalize on their strengths and preferences.

* Validation is almost always extremely difficult at first; therefore, emphasize the idea that validating communication is a skill that the student will be able to work on, no matter how impossible or difficult the task may seem initially.
* One unequivocal sign that a person is typing his or her own words is any instance of typing without physical support. This typically occurs long before the person begins to type all communication without support or even if the person never types all or most words without support. Facilitators and other observers may note and point out to the person using facilitation that he or she does some pointing independently, for example "y" or "yes" and "n" or "no," answers to a multiple choice questions, ing and ion and similarly common endings of words, space bar, carriage returns, periods, the person's name, the date, and other frequently used words or combinations of letters.

* Students can be encouraged to play computer games; over time, and with the knowledge and agreement of the student, turn the computer screen away from facilitator's line of vision. Intersperse the open condition (where facilitator can see the screen) with the closed condition (with facilitator unable to see the screen) until the student begins to achieve success consistently in the closed condition.

* Students can practice multiple choice selections, math problems and other activities that do not require word retrieval, since word retrieval (e.g. naming objects) has proven difficult for many people with developmental disabilities.

* Students can practice reporting on reading or events in which they have participated. This can take the form of typing individual words that the facilitator has not seen, or it may be far more elaborate, for example where the facilitated communication user reports on an entire story that the facilitator has not been shown.

* Provide extensive opportunities for students to practice validation strategies. Prior studies have shown that individuals may not succeed or improve their performance with a particular skill such as message passing until they have participated in numerous (i.e. 6-12) practice sessions. Individuals are likely to improve over time, but their performance may be variable, with successful confirmation of authorship interspersed with baseline (i.e. beginning) level performance in other sessions.

* Carefully observe and record a student's progress with particular validation strategies, noting those in which the student is more or less successful. Discuss progress with students.

* Monitor for quality facilitation, especially that the student looks at the target (e.g. keyboard), that facilitators ask clarifying questions when the content of what has been typed is unclear (i.e. "I'm not sure what you mean there. Could you type that again?") and that the least amount of support necessary is provided (i.e. work toward independent typing).

* Never rely on a single type of skill or activity (e.g. message passing) as the means for individuals to confirm authorship. What may work for one student might prove difficult for
another. A time of exploration with various strategies provides both a positive and informative process.

* Document student progress with facilitation by creating a communication portfolio. Include for example, instances of naturally occurring message passing, answering multiple choice questions or fill-in-blank questions where the facilitator is unaware of what has been asked, independent typing, ability of student to speak letters or words typed, spoken content that confirms what the person types (e.g. announcing a joke as the person types out a joke), idiosyncratic use of vocabulary or phrases and creative spellings by a single student with various facilitators, particular style of writing (e.g. heavy use of alliteration), and independence (i.e. typing without physical support).

* Select activities in which the student will be interested. Also, select activities that coincide with other academic instruction.

* Once a student has demonstrated his or her authorship of communication, even if based on a single or a few instances, any subsequent difficulties with particular validation tasks should not be allowed to nullify the significance of the earlier successes.

For further information on this topic, we encourage you to read about or view a videotape on independent typing (Eastham, 1992, p. 84; Watts & Wurzburg, 1994; Kochmeister, 1995), view videotapes on or read especially those studies in which individuals have confirmed authorship under structured or controlled conditions (Steering Committee, Division of Intellectual Disability Services, 1993; Intellectual Disability Review Panel, 1989; Murray & Biklen, 1995; Ogletree, Hamtil, Solberg, & Scoby-Schmelzle, 1993; Sheehan & Matuzozi, in press; Simon, Toll, & Whitehair, 1994; Vazquez, 1994) and read about portfolio analysis of facilitated communication (Biklen, Saha, & Kliewer, 1995).

References


