

Learning About Independent Typing from People Working to Achieve It

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This article originally appeared in Vol. 2 No. 2 (Feb., 1994) of the Facilitated Communication Digest, [pp.4-5].

Lucy Harrison (age 17), Larry Bissonnette (age 36) and Sharisa Kochmeister (age 15) all use facilitated communication as their means of expression. They are all working on and achieving independent typing.

These three people are featured in an educational video that we have developed on independent typing (Editor's note: see ordering information for "Every Step of the Way.") Lucy typed with her facilitators placing a hand on her shoulder, occasionally lifting off her shoulder. Larry typed with a facilitator's hand on his shoulder. Sharisa typed with no physical support; as she typed, her father or stepmother held an arm above, but not touching hers.

Prior to being introduced to facilitation, all three were presumed retarded, scoring in the severe-to-moderate range on intelligence tests, and all three were believed to lack literacy skills. None had an effective means of communication; Lucy and Larry could speak, but their speech was characterized by echoed phrases and was not conversational; Sharisa does not speak.

Lucy referred to her efforts to achieve independent typing as a "STRUGGLE ... (involving) MANY THOUSANDS OF HOURS OF PAINSTAKING THAT HAVE GONE IN TO GETTING HERE. IT HAD WELL STRUCTURED PLANS THAT WE (she and her facilitator) DE VIED AND STUCK WITH." She explained her progress toward success with independence as deriving from her commitment to achieve it:

I ... HAD AN AGENDA OF HOW I WOULD BE COMFORTABLE IN THE WORK LD OF NORMAL PEOPLE AND HOW TO GO TO IT. I WANTED INITIALLY TO STAY IN MY LIFE OF MY WORLD AND NOT BE A PART OF THE OTHER WORLD THAT YOU LIVE IN. BUT I SLOWLY BEGAN TO DO SOME INTERESTING THINGS THAT MADE ME NEED BECOME MORE AND MORE A MEMBER OF THE REAL WORLD. I FELT THAT ALOT OF THE STEP S THAT WE TOOK WERE INTELLECTUALLY RIGHT BUT EMOTIONALLY EXCUCIATINGLY DIFFICULT. I HAD TO FREE MY SELF EVERY STEP OF THE WAY. AND LUCKILY MRS. WALSH (her first facilitator) RECOGNIZED THE DIFFICULT NESS OF EACH STEP SHE ENCOUGH ENCOURAGEMENT TO HELP ME OVER EACH HURDLE WE MET.

WE PLANNED THE STEPS TO INDEPENEDENCE TOGETHER AND SHE WAS THE STRENGTH I NEEDED TO MAKE EACH JUMP. ALTHOUGH THE MANY JUMPS WERE NOT GR GREAT TO OTHER PEOPLE THE LEAPS WERE LIKE JUMPING OVER SKYSTAPERS TO M ME.

For Lucy, being disconnected from the "normal world" had nothing to do with intelligence; it had to do with her inability to communicate. And this in turn she described as a combination of a physical difficulty and a matter of confidence or determination. Indeed, her description of working toward independence sounds very much like a person describing what it's like to go through rehabilitation after a serious injury: wondering if rehabilitation is possible, marshalling the emotional strength to proceed, battling self doubt, making plans, needing allies, and seeing as huge gains what to others must seem like small steps.

Lucy is determined to achieve more: "I WILL EVENTUALLY BECOME INDEPENDENT IN MOST OF NOT ALL COMMUNICATION THAT ALSO HAS MANY STAGED BUT I WILL SING AND DANCE ON THE M ALL."

Its noteworthy that in the text of her typing, she still struggled with automatic completions (typing a word that begins with the same letters as the intended word -- see the instance above where she typed "ENCOUGH ENCOURAGEMENT") and with accuracy, but she used her other hand to make deletions.

For Larry, his selection of words and expressions announces his creativity. And indeed he is an artist, having had several exhibitions of his drawings at local galleries. Like Lucy, he described his accomplishments with facilitation as one would expect someone to describe progress in learning a new sport or other physical task. Asked to explain his achievement of the hand-on-the-shoulder level of independence in his typing, Larry too identified practice as a crucial ingredient: "EXPERIENCE IS NOT TO BE DENIED. ITS HARD BUT TOTALLY PURATANICALLY NECESSARY." It is, he explained, a "PAINFUL BOTHER BUT CATHARTIC." Making reference to Scholastic Aptitude Tests preparatory course advertized on television, Larry jokingly calls his training in facilitated communication a "KAPLAN COURSE ON FC."

When asked what has made the biggest difference for her in achieving the ability to type with no physical support, Sharisa responded: "OTHER PEOPLE KNOWING I'M SMART AND SELF-CONTROL AND ESTEEM." She explained that she had to overcome others' "DISBELIEF IN MY INTELLECT AND INTEGRITY" and "MY OWN DOUBTS ABOUT BEING READY TO GIVE UP SUPPORT AND CONTACT." In other words, she needed to develop the mental attitude that she could succeed with the task of independent typing. Then, referring to other elements that aided her progress to independent typing and which might aid others, Sharisa advised, "GO SLOWLY, IN SMALL INCREMENTS. THE KEYS ARE PRACTICE, PATIENCE AND PERSEVERANCE."

Lucy, Larry, and Sharisa have benefitted from many supportive people encouraging them to their achievements. At the same time, they, like others, have had to weather doubts about their competence that still persist among some people in society. It is because of this that their progress toward independence is so impressive and important. Their efforts remind me of the words spoken by Bob Williams, Assistant Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services at the May 1993 Conference on Facilitated Communication in Syracuse:

To those of you who rely on facilitated communication, I make one more plea, and this I know isn't a simple one, but if we are to break the silence, you must lead the way, especially with people who still have these doubts. It isn't necessarily right, but it is the way things are, and if we are to lead others out of silence, you must lead the way.