

## Understanding and Negotiating Cue-Seeking by Facilitated Communication Users

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In August, 1994, I wrote an article in the Digest called Proposal for a practical shift in our language. In it, I recommended shifting the focus of our attention from looking at what the facilitator does (often referred to as "influencing" or "controlling" communication by those who reject the use of facilitated communication), to focusing on the actions and active participation of the facilitated communication user, (which I referred to as "cue-seeking") as s/he confronts the day-to-day challenges of how to communicate effectively. This paper is an attempt to describe the ways in which a facilitator can support the facilitated communication user in understanding his or her cue-seeking strategies, in mastering those strategies which are effective, socially acceptable, and which contribute to the empowerment of the facilitated communication user, and in recognizing and avoiding those strategies which are not.

As Rae Sonnenmeier (1993) has described, communication is rarely if ever one-way in nature. In our ordinary day-to-day communication, we rely, often unconsciously, on the verbal and non-verbal actions of our partners to keep the communication going. We take such things as eye-contact, spoken "Uh-huh"s, and nods of approval for granted, mainly noticing them only in their absence. For example, most of us have had the experience of asking the other person on the telephone line, "Are you still there?" when too long a period has gone by without spoken feedback.

When we are in a role of teacher, facilitator, or supporter of another person's communication, we are likely to be conscious of the feedback we are providing, and we are likely to provide that feedback in specific structured ways. Elsewhere in this issue, Rosemary Crossley (1996) points out many of the forms of feedback which conscientious communication partners should provide in order to support the communication of persons experiencing difficulty in communication, and of facilitated communication users in particular. The focus in Crossley's article is on the importance of extensive facilitator feedback in the correction of misunderstandings which are likely to occur when listening to or reading the typed output of a person with a severe communication impairment.

This article focuses on another aspect of the communicative interaction: the non-systematic, and often unconscious feedback which we provide in our day-to-day conversations, especially at times when we are not focused on our role as a supporter of another's communication. The effect of such feedback on a person's communication depends to a large extent on that person's effectiveness in obtaining useful information from the environment, and, equally important, in ignoring misleading information at the same time

## **Cue-seeking story #1**

Two sailors decided to attend Sunday morning church services in a foreign country. Since they did not speak the local language, they agreed to watch the man sitting in front of them, and to do whatever he did. At one point in the services, he stood, they stood too, and everyone in the congregation laughed.

After the service, they met the pastor, and asked him what was so funny.

He said, "I had just announced the birth of a new baby, and asked the grandfather to stand up to receive our blessings."

We must begin by recognizing and honoring the very active role of the facilitated communication user in obtaining information from other people and other aspects of the environment. Only then will we be in a position to negotiate with that person concerning, on one hand, the support that s/he requires from others, and, on the other hand, the social conventions which should be followed if s/he wishes to be viewed as a credible communicator.

## **The politics of cue-seeking**

All of us engage in cue-seeking behavior at various times in our lives as communicators. In my personal experience, I have noted that most people are less likely to engage in extensive cue-seeking in situations where they are:

1. identifiably part of a dominant group or culture;
2. fluent users of the language;
3. in a position of authority; or
4. engaging in what we perceive as low-risk communication.

On the other hand, people are more likely to engage in extensive, sometimes prolonged cue-seeking before communicating at times when they are:

1. identifiably part of an unwelcome group or culture;
2. not fluent in the language -- in other words, unsure of pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, spelling, etc.;
3. of perceived inferior status; or
4. engaging in communication with a potentially high risk either because

- \* it's likely to be evaluated (e.g. an oral examination),
- \* it's likely to have a major impact on their lives, or
- \* their status is in question, and may be affected by the "rightness" of their communication.

### **Cue-seeking story #2**

Interviewer: "How much is 2 + 2?"

Job applicant: "How much do you want it to be?"

It's worth noting that people with severe communication impairments deal much more commonly with situations of inferiority and high-risk communication; thus, many people with severe communication impairments are likely to have acquired extensive cue-seeking strategies, which they bring with them to any new communicative enterprise such as facilitated communication training. These high-strength cue-seeking strategies are likely to have served them well on many occasions in the past. In school programs where the focus is on compliance and on "getting the answer right," elaborate cue-seeking strategies may have been the individual's most effective tool for getting ahead.

Unfortunately, the same strategies which seem so useful in some settings may damage an individual's credibility and serve as barriers to that person's empowerment in other settings.

### **Cue-seeking story #3**

Robert Benchley once found himself sitting on a train next to a woman whom he knew he had met before. She greeted him warmly -- but he couldn't remember her name. He decided that he would try to draw her into conversations that would give him clues about who she was.

At one point in the conversation, she made a passing reference to her brother. Benchley saw his opportunity.

"Ah, yes," he said, "your brother... now just remind me -- what is he up to these days?"

The woman looked at him rather coldly. "He's still President of the United States," she said.

Eugene Marcus is an autistic friend of mine with whom I have co-authored a book chapter on his personal research into the validation of facilitated communication. In describing his own cue-seeking behavior and the ways in which it became a barrier to the validation of his own communication, Eugene has stated:

[One] barrier was my own messy method of wordfinding. Over the years I had worked to be a good student. That thinking meant that if there was an answer to my question that the teacher expected, they gave small indications of what they expected, and they were often gratified to learn that I knew it. I found myself with similar skills at reading Mayer's tiny hand movements and other indicators of what he was thinking. So I had to substitute my own clear thinking for his... (Marcus & Shevin, in press.)

In day-to-day interactions, facilitated communication users' misplaced reliance on irrelevant information received from cue-seeking can lead to situations in which statements that the facilitated communication users type are never fully trusted by their communication partners; it can also lead to situations in which facilitators, unaware of their role in the co-construction of communication, become the unwitting partners in the construction of plausible but non-factual accounts.

The damaging effects of uncritical reliance by facilitated communication users on information obtained through cue-seeking activities is most glaringly evident in the results of several experiments on the issue of facilitated communication authorship. Biklen and Cardinal (in press) and others have written about many of the factors which lead to negative results in experimental studies of authorship validation. One largely unexplored factor in those studies is the absence of any significant help provided to facilitated communication users in distinguishing between productive and counterproductive levels of cue-seeking. In its most simple terms, we would have to ask whether anyone had bothered to explain to facilitated communication users the "rules of the game" -- that you're supposed to name the picture you're looking at and not the one your facilitator might think you see? Beyond that, was there opportunity to practice, debrief and problem-solve about what it feels like to type when your facilitator already knows an answer to the question asked, as compared to when s/he doesn't?

### **Factors contributing to over-reliance on cue-seeking**

Over the past several years, I have facilitated with dozens of people directly, and have consulted with many more individuals and their supporters on ways to make facilitated communication a more useful part of their lives. There are a number of frequently recurring factors which seem to lead to situations in which individuals over-rely on cues from other people and aspects of the environment

1. Situations in which giving the right answer is important. The most common example of this is the typical classroom situation, in which the teacher asks a question with a factual answer, and the student is either right or wrong.

2. Situations in which the communication pair is isolated. An example would be when a facilitated communication user has only one facilitator, when most of the facilitated communication user's conversations are with that facilitator, and when the facilitator has little or no contact with other facilitated communication users, other facilitators, or

consultants. This is a situation in which the facilitated communication user may learn to "read" the cues provided by one person, without gaining insight into the extent to which those are the same cues which are common or accepted throughout the communicating community.

3. Situations in which "passing" is important. Many facilitated communication users are unsure of whether others recognize their intelligence and autonomy. In the presence of people who see them as unintelligent or marginally intelligent, there may be a reluctance to say "I don't know" or "I don't understand," at the risk of reinforcing one's negative social image.

4. Situations in which speed of response is important. Some individuals who will take the time to formulate thoughtful responses, but who require extended time to do so, will also provide responses "plucked from the environment" when under time pressure. A 14-year-old of my acquaintance, who uses facilitated communication, would often type words that he could see somewhere in the classroom when his aide pressured him to hurry up and finish. As she learned to give him plenty of time to complete his work, his answers became much more "on-target."

### **The Shift to Constructive use of Cue-seeking**

Given the possibly negative impact of an over-reliance on cue-seeking in communication, shouldn't we just be helping our communication partners to bulldoze ahead in their communication without seeking any information from the physical or social environment? Obviously, such an objective would be impossible to meet. More importantly, obliviousness to the social and material environment would not be a desirable situation for the typical facilitated communication user.

So what, then, are we reaching for? This was a question that Eugene Marcus and I struggled with during the 15 months in which he sought to validate his own typing by attempting to pass a "double-blind" picture-naming test using the "O.D. Heck" protocols (Wheeler et al., 1993). In an afterword to the chapter describing that experience, Eugene posed questions to himself and answered them, regarding the issue of "influence" by the facilitator. His responses pinpoint the work a facilitated communication user does in learning to make positive use of his or her cue-seeking skills:

Q. Thinking traces its way into what gets typed. Why is that?

A. Thinking reveals both your feelings and your ideas. Reading somebody's thoughts from their touch is no different from hearing their anger in their voice or smelling their fear in their sweat. Most ideas are not feeling-free, giving off signals through the hands like attraction, confusion, clearness, yes, no, etc. So if I can pick up feelings, it is frankly easy to capture their associated ideas.

Q. Tell how you overcame Mayer's influence.

A. Mayer's influence is not something bad so I don't wish to overcome it. I have needed to understand it though so I found ways to study it by trying different things as we practiced. We tried various physical practices, and various mental ones. The mental ones were the most useful, because it was Mayer's constant speculation that was my loudest interference.

Q. Tell about why you don't get that interference now.

A. I do, but once you have experimented with working beyond it, it is no longer an interference. It is now more like a counterpoint to my tune (Marcus and Shevin, in press).

When both communication partners are fully aware that cuing and cue-seeking will always be a part of their communicative interactions, and both are committed to the facilitated communication user taking control of those statements s/he initiates, then they are well on the way to making cue-seeking a positive aspect of their interactions. Here are some of the specific strategies for fostering that shift:

1. Expand the number of people with whom both partners use facilitated communication. This means

- \* the facilitated communication user should experience, and have the opportunity to discuss, what it's like to be supported by a number of different facilitators;

- \* the facilitator should have the opportunity to feel what it's like to facilitate for a variety of facilitated communication users;

- \* the facilitator and facilitated communication user should not only talk between themselves; others should be involved as conversation partners, and the facilitator and facilitated communication user can debrief on that experience.

2. The facilitator needs to become aware of his or her own typical cuing behavior. This can be done through

- \* simulation activities, such as the ones described by Annegret Schubert (1994);

- \* having other facilitators observe and comment on his or her work with the facilitated communication user; and

- \* conversation on the topic with the facilitated communication user.

3. Both the facilitator and the facilitated communication user should become aware of the situations between them in which cue-seeking is most likely to be relied on. This will vary tremendously depending on the individuals involved. For example, some facilitated communication users I know become very hesitant, search the visual environment, and seek

physical cues from their facilitators when they are unsure of a word's spelling; others push on regardless, spelling a rough approximation to the word they are after and trusting the situation to "sort itself out." For others, the desire to appear intelligent and to act in socially appropriate ways in novel social situations may create settings in which they look for cues intensely.

This does not mean that these are situations in which cue-seeking is ideally avoided. Rather, by both facilitator and facilitated communication user being aware that these are situations in which cues are likely to be actively sought, the facilitator and facilitated communication user are then in a position to reach an agreement on the forms which support should take in those settings.

4. The facilitator and other communication supporters should engage in "confidence-building" measures. People often need support in overcoming their doubts about their own intelligence, abilities, or clarity of thought. Such support may be necessary is people are to "trust their own thinking." Some forms such support may take include:

- \* Assuring the person of your respect for his or her intelligence, even at those times when the message being communicated is unclear.

- \* taking responsibility for that lack of clarity -- for example, saying "I didn't understand what you wrote" rather than "what you wrote makes no sense."

- \* interrupting teasing or put-downs of the individual by other people.

- \* Reminding the person that "I don't know" or "I don't understand" may be both accurate and useful answers.

To summarize: cue-seeking is an important feature in all communicative partnerships. It can be both a source of support and a source of confusion in facilitated communication relationships. By making cue-seeking a recognized, understood, and negotiated part of the relationship, we increase the likelihood that we will help our friends with severe communication impairments to say what is truly on their minds and in their hearts.

## References

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