Issues of Influence: Some Concerns and Suggestions

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As has been discussed in various places, facilitator influence is a real and important issue that requires consideration (e.g. Biklen, 1990; Biklen 1993; Sonnenmeier, 1993). Experimental validation studies abound which demonstrate that, given constrained conditions, facilitators sometimes seem to influence what the facilitated communication user is typing (Wheeler et al., 1993; Hudson, 1993). Facilitators call us to tell us that someone they work with is only typing predictable words. Some authors report facilitators who describe their experiences as telepathic (Crossley, 1993; IDRP, 1989). Others relate how challenging it was initially to differentiate their own movements from those of the person using facilitated communication (Remington-Gurney, 1989).

While concerns over influence are valid, they do not negate the possibility of the same individuals typing their own words (i.e. uninfluenced.) Indeed, the evidence of individuals typing information that could not be known by their facilitators, and/or typing independently, has been documented in numerous research and autobiographical reports (Biklen, 1993; Crossley, 1990; IDRP, 1989; Eastham, 1992). So the question for us is, how can we minimize influence in typing?

First, we must remember that the purpose of facilitation is to support individuals in communicating their own thoughts, not parroting those of others. Second, our goal is communication which empowers the person to increase control over their own lives; this will happen if we decrease possibilities of negative facilitator influence and follow through on facilitated communication users’ ideas. Third, since our goal is to ensure that the facilitated communication user maintains control over his/her messages, it is essential to work with people on achieving independence or at least on gaining control of the typing/communication process. It is no great gift to be able to repeat another person’s words, especially if this leads to confusion about whether the person with the communication difficulty is able to convey his or her own thoughts.

Last fall during her stay as a visiting scholar at the Facilitated Communication Institute, we asked Rosemary Crossley to suggest how facilitators should address situations in which there are concerns about facilitator influence. Drawing on her ideas and contributing several of our own, we recommend the following:

1. Teach the typist to protest any form of facilitator influence (e.g. anticipating words or letters, over-interpretation, inflections that suggest desired response); Ask clarifying questions of the typist, for example, "Is this what you meant to type or did you want to say something else?" Allow and encourage typists to express their own opinions.
2. Opportunities to make real choices and decisions should begin early in the facilitated communication process. This conveys the value of the typist taking control of his or her communication.  
3. Make sure the typist looks at the keyboard. Single finger typists who don't look at the keyboard require more support from their facilitators and are more likely to pick up/seek cues than those who look.  
4. Give the minimum support needed for the person to type, and work continuously to reduce support even further. Questions of telepathy generally do not arise unless the facilitator is giving the typist more support than he/she really needs.  
5. When supporting the hand or arm, give constant backward pressure. Push away gently from the keyboard to reduce the possibility of accidentally directing the individual toward specific letters.  
6. Watch your reactions. It may be tempting to attribute special powers to either the facilitator or the communication user. Don't. It will be more empowering in the long run to encourage ordinary interactions, to let a person know how much you value his or her thoughts.  
7. Don't over-interpret. If the meaning of the message isn't obvious, ask the person to clarify. Making sense out of 'nonsense' will impose your meaning on the typist's message.  
8. If a message appears to be 'telepathic', always ask yourself what you could have done differently as the facilitator to encourage the person to type his/her own thoughts. Think about reducing support, encouraging eye contact with the keyboard, avoiding anticipating words, and watching one's language. Remember, the role of the facilitator is to ensure that the person with the communication disability develops the ability to communicate his or her own thoughts.  

References:  