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Book Review

Facilitated Communication Training. *Rosemary Crossley.* New York, Teachers College Press, 1994, 150 pp., $15.95 (paper).

Communication Unbound: How Facilitated Communication is Challenging Traditional Views of Autism and Ability/Disability. *Douglas Biklen.* New York, Teachers College Press, 1993, 221 pp., $17.95 (paper).

Facilitated Communication: The Clinical and Social Phenomenon. *Howard Shane* (Editor). San Diego, Singular Publishing Group, 1994, 323 pp.

Facilitated communication is the most controversial phenomenon ever to impact the field of autism. Proponents declare that facilitated communication is an amazing breakthrough in communication training. Many others fear that its use may be harmful to the individuals it was designed to assist, as well as to their families and the staff working with them. The practitioners of this strategy would have us believe that we now know startling new truths about individuals with autism and about autism (and all disabilities). This review focuses on three books: Two are based on testimonial descriptions and avow the absence of scientific theory and research; and one is based on sound scientific tenets.

The first book, *Facilitated Communication Training*, was written by Rosemary Crossley, often described as the principal founder of facilitated communication. Crossley divides the book into 12 chapters, opening with a description of facilitated communication and the circumstances under which it was developed in Australia. The writing style is informal and friendly. For the descriptive sections of the book, such a style is successful. However, this style of presentation is not effective in sections that relate to theory or scientific reasoning.

Crossley describes facilitated communication as a strategy in which a facilitator physically assists an individual to use a communication aid with his/her hands. There appear to be two behaviors of primary importance in facilitated communication: First, the messages that are created via the communication aide and, second, the claim by the facilitator that they are not guiding (i.e., controlling) specific responses made. Crossley denies that facilitators influence the messages and, thus, she attributes them to the person being assisted. Like other proponents of facilitated communication,

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Crossley implies that she should be believed on face value in her denial of influence and that attempts to verify this lack of influence are an affront to those being facilitated.

The initial chapters include several important statements regarding what Crossley states are vital components of facilitated communication. Among these, she writes, "It is vital to ensure that the student makes eye contact with the target before making a selection" (p. 19). Given this, it is striking that photographs within the book, along with demonstrations of facilitated communication, videotapes, and television coverage, all show the facilitators intensely focused on the keyboard, rather than on the students' faces.

Crossley's discussion of speech acquisition and reading is remarkable for its disregard of relevant research. Instead, she replaces research with her personal views. For example, she writes, "No one teaches a baby to speak. The baby learns from exposure. People make sounds around the baby and, amazingly quickly, the baby attaches meaning to those sounds" (p. 32). Although there is controversy regarding the role of teaching in language acquisition, to reduce language acquisition to "exposure" is not a thoughtful analysis. No theory of language acquisition, whether based upon innate mechanisms or a history of reinforcement, claims that exposure is sufficient for acquisition.

Unfortunately, Crossley uses her views on exposure and language acquisition to buoy her views that children can learn to read by mere exposure to printed materials. The only support for the idea that many students using facilitated communication can read comes from the writing these students produce through facilitated communication. Many people, whatever their functioning level, can read without being able to write. We know this by observing how their actions are governed by written information. Such comprehension assessments are not recommended by Crossley. Rather, she suggests only assessment via facilitated activities.

The most glaring weakness of Crossley's case for facilitated communication is that, despite the sophistication of the facilitated messages cited throughout the book, there is not a single description of an individual who has learned to communicate to any significant degree without the physical contact of a facilitator.

The issue of independence from the facilitator is also a major problem in Douglas Biklen's book, *Communication Unbound: How Facilitated Communication is Challenging Traditional Views of Autism and Ability/Disability*. As is apparent in the title, Biklen touts what he perceives to be a discovery not only of a new communication technique but about autism and all disabilities. Four of the seven chapters in the book have been published in other forms.

The principal orientation of all of Biklen's work on facilitated communication is revealed in the opening section of the first chapter. He describes two individuals who produced, via facilitation, a few sentences "fairly quickly, without hesitation and *independently (with just the hand on the shoulder)*" [emphasis added] (p. 1). This description also reveals the key problem in interpreting facilitated communication. Throughout the book, Biklen sees no contradiction in using the word "independent" while simultaneously describing physical contact between the facilitator and the assisted individual. He gives no clear definition of independence. With neither a definition nor a procedure for verifying independence, there is no way to answer the central question in facilitated communication: Who is creating the messages? Instead of defining important terms himself, Biklen simply raises questions (supposedly by a facilitated student) about society's definition of the term.

The fields of behavior analysis (with its dependence on the functional analysis of behavior) and augmentative and alternative communication have focused on the need for professionals to respect the actions and choices of individuals with various handicaps on the theory that all our actions are governed by the same set of principles. From a functional, or communicative perspective, actions are less important for their form (aggression, self-injury, tantrumming, pointing, talking, etc.) than they are for the function they serve. Biklen appears to replace this respect for the individual's perspective with his own interpretation of what is important and meaningful for a student. He repeatedly writes that particular behaviors of individuals with autism should be ignored, not as part of a behavior change strategy but because the behaviors have no meaning. He describes them as "nonsensical" (p. 198) or "extraneous action" (p. 192), and states, "their echolalia appears more automatic than volitional" (p. 66). Biklen appears to eschew the systematic analysis of behavior in stating: "The unusual behaviors are not predictors of students' communicative potential. The behaviors are merely that—behaviors" (p. 42).

The last two chapters consist of the ramifications of Biklen's assumption that facilitated communication is a real phenomenon. These chapters contain views that Biklen has long promoted with regard to all individuals, with and without disabilities. Although many of his assumptions appear to have value, they cannot be supported by a technique that does not produce messages from its intended users.

In sharp contrast to the testimonial basis of the first two works is the erudite book edited by Howard Shane, *Facilitated Communication: The Clinical and Social Phenomenon*. The book is organized into 8 chapters. Shane opens the books with a description of central issues associated with the development of facilitated communication and issues pertaining to veri-

fication. Shane appropriately questions whether there is a single description of facilitated communication and for whom the technique is best suited. Shane also points out many of the empirical and logical flaws associated with the notion of a "general apraxia" as the basis for autism. He questions other ideas advanced by Biklen on rational grounds. Shane asserts, "facilitated communication appears to be an illogical and unfounded practice" (p. 29).

Jon Palfreman, creator of science documentaries, reviews the history of facilitated communication in Australia. He notes that the use of facilitated communication has been discredited in Australia to the point that the program where Biklen first observed its use "has lost all of its state funding" (p. 54). A compelling chapter is next presented by Wolf Wolfensberger who has championed the issue of normalization for more than 20 years. The title of his chapter, "The 'Facilitated Communication' Craze as an Instance of Pathological Science: The Cold Fusion of Human Services," best summarizes his perspective. He is optimistic that the "facilitated communication craze may have crested" (p. 116). His chapter also provides an excellent synopsis of the harm that the use of facilitated communication has caused.

Barry Prizant, Amy Wetherby, and Patrick Rydell highlight many of the discrepancies between the personal views of Biklen and Crossley and the wealth of research concerning particular features associated with autism. For example, they review some of their own seminal work on echolalia and stress that, rather than dismissing such behavior as meaningless and random, we should carefully analyze such behaviors to see how they function for the individual. They believe that respecting the communication style of the individual (whether with autism or some other handicap) is more beneficial than assuming that such actions have no meaning or function.

Gina Green provides a superb summation and in-depth analysis of the "quality of the evidence" regarding facilitated communication. She provides a clear comparison of descriptive and experimental research. She does an excellent job of clarifying why the arguments presented by Biklen (and other facilitated communication proponents) in favor of nonexperimental analysis of facilitated communication outcomes are exceedingly weak. In only 4 of 25 controlled evaluative studies did any facilitated communication-enabled participant demonstrate "skills that might be considered unexpected" (p. 212). However, even in these cases, the productions were not of the clinically significant literacy skills suggested to be commonplace by Biklen and Crossley. Perhaps more important, these productions were always accompanied by a high proportion of examples of facilitator-based messages. In all the other examples, clear support for facilitator influence was demonstrated.

Kenneth Margolin, a Boston attorney, carefully reviews the relationship between facilitated communication and the legal system. I strongly encourage anyone who plans to use facilitated communication to carefully read this chapter so as to ascertain what legal risks they may encounter and place upon children with autism, their families, and associated staff.

In the concluding chapters, Shane carefully outlines a set of guidelines that would be necessary and helpful to those who want to determine the source of communication in facilitated communication. All of these suggestions can (and have) been done in a manner that respects the rights of all individuals associated with facilitated communication. Shane reviews "The Facilitated Nightmare: The Dark Side of the Phenomenon." Shane rightfully points out that while the practitioners of facilitated communication often teach adherents how to avoid facilitator influence, these individuals "avoid what seems to be the central issue of the entire facilitated communication controversy; namely, without establishing the source of the communication, taking precaution to avoid admitted influences seems as if one is putting the proverbial cart in front of the proverbial horse" (p. 314).

In summary, the explosive popularity of facilitated communication has in part been based on the idea that no one with autism could learn to lower an isolated finger to a key on a keyboard solely with physical contact on their arm or shoulder. From this disbelief comes a host of illogical, untestable "theories" relating to autism, communication, reading, writing, education, and the value system of the entire society. At this time we do have scientific evidence that it is possible to teach children and adults with severe communication impairments to be independent and spontaneous in their communication, often from their first training sessions (Bondy & Frost, 1994). In contrast, the supporters of facilitated communication offer no evidence beyond what is produced through facilitation that facilitated communication has a meaningful impact on the lives of people who use it.

REFERENCES

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Andrew S. Bondy
Delaware Autistic Program