Facilitated Communication, Autism, and Ouija

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Facilitated Communication (FC) is a technique that allegedly helps persons who are unable to communicate, or who have limited communication skills, to communicate better, sometimes at a level far exceeding their presumed abilities. It is claimed that what is needed is a facilitator, someone who typically supports the subject's pointing finger—or hand, wrist, elbow, or shoulder—and a list of letters, numbers, words, or characters. These symbols can be on a piece of paper—one with a laminated or smooth surface is preferred—or on a computer or typewriter keyboard. One device that has gained popularity for FC is the Canon Communicator, a small, portable electronic keyboard with a tape printout.

This technique was developed in the 1970s by Rosemary Crossley and her associates at the Dignity Through Education and Language (DEAL) Communication Centre in Melbourne, Australia, for work with people with cerebral palsy. It was introduced into the United States by Douglas Biklen, director of the division of special education and rehabilitation at Syracuse University.

FC is now being used as a communication aid for individuals with autism—a serious disorder often characterized by multiple and profound problems in cognitive reasoning, communication, and socialization skills—with claims of miraculous results.

In one case, a mute young girl, apparently with no awareness of the meaning of money or the significance of holidays and presents, allegedly typed out that she didn't like Christmas...
because she didn’t have the money to buy her mother a present. It has been reported that in other cases individuals who had previously been unable to read or write or cipher found themselves in college classrooms typing out their exams with their facilitators.

Although FC has been criticized as being nothing more than a phenomenon of the Ouija board type, Biklen argues that messages produced often have typographical errors, phonetic spellings, unusual utterances, and content unfamiliar to the facilitator. These and similar arguments actually serve to further the case that FC and Ouija are quite similar if not identical.

This article will elaborate on the parallels, as I see them, between Ouija and FC. My information on Ouija comes primarily from a text by Stoker Hunt (1985), Ouija: The Most Dangerous Game. The examples of FC provided here come from two training sessions I attended that were conducted by Biklen’s associates for parents of individuals with autism.

First, FC and Ouija share many of the same physical components. Both typically use a board with alphanumeric characters. Although a Ouija board can be easily purchased, Hunt includes an illustration of a hand-drawn Ouija board that can be used and also reports cases of Ouija being performed on typewriters or simply with pencil or pen on blank paper (with messages using the latter tools usually referred to as automatic writing). This is also the case with FC. The other component of both classical Ouija and FC is a pointer. In the case of Ouija, traditionally a small three-pointed planchette is used with the fingers resting lightly on it; however, anything can be used that can slide over the surface of the board with the subject’s fingers resting on it. For example, Hunt suggests using an inverted juice glass. In the case of FC, the pointer is the finger of the subject, and the facilitator lightly supports that finger or some part of the subject’s arm.

In Ouija, the subject may have his or her eyes closed (especially in the case where a second party is also in contact with the planchette); Hunt says that some people can perform Ouija while engaged in other activities, such as talking or reading. In filmed accounts I have seen of FC with autistic individuals, the subject often appears to be focusing attention everywhere but on the keyboard or list.

In both Ouija and FC, and this is a critical point, the facilitators or the persons using the planchette swear they are not guiding the pointing, but that the movement comes from something other than their own volition. In the case of FC, the movement is said to be coming from the subject; in Ouija, it is said to be coming from either a spiritual realm or the subject’s unconscious. Facilitators have told me that until they tried FC for themselves they too were skeptical, but that once they tried it they knew the source of the movement was definitely not themselves. People who use the Ouija board (as well as people who have
participated in table-turning at séances, or who have used pendulums or dowsing rods) have also sworn, even on their lives, that they are not the source of the movement.

James Randi (1986) writes that there are two kinds of people claiming to have special powers, those who honestly believe they have these powers and those who are outright fakes. From all I have seen of FC, I believe the facilitators are honest and sincere and are not consciously or deliberately engaging in deceit. However, just because the facilitators have the sensation that the movements or messages are not originating from themselves, this does not mean that they are not.

This is a hard reality to grasp. Faraday, as early as the mid-1800s conducted experiments demonstrat-
ing that the pressure on moving tables in séances came from the operators. Similarly, Randi has explained how, despite strong sensations to the contrary, the movement of dowsing rods can be explained simply as the effect of a physical system under tension. These sensations are illusions, and powerful ones. In all these cases, it comes down to a matter of a lack of understanding rather than intentional fraud.

My sense is that in FC the movement may indeed come from the subject as a conditioned response, but that direction to a particular letter comes unwittingly from the facilitator. (Subjects are at first very resistant to pointing, but M&M's or other reinforcements are sometimes offered to get them to begin; and once the messages start coming, the ecstasy of the facilitator over the response of the subject is probably a potent reinforcer.) Facilitators argue that they are not conscious of the messages before they are typed, and I don't deny this. It is another parallel between FC and Ouija.

With FC, the messages are often much more complex than a single thought. They are sometimes said to come so fast and are sometimes so lengthy that they could not possibly have been generated by the facilitator. This same argument has been raised with Ouija. In one extraordinary case, Pearl Curran was able over a five-year period working with the Ouija board to dictate 29 bound volumes (4,375 single-spaced pages) of conversation in the form of epigrams, poems, allegories, short stories, plays, and full-length novels. For one of her novels, she was able to dictate the last chapter of 6,000 words in a single evening through the Ouija board. When asked about the Ouija board, Curran replied that it was “just a piece of dead wood, nothing more. It is I

who move the board, in response to the subconscious or conscious impulse. There is no mystery in the movement; the mystery, if any, is in the source of the impulse.”

For both FC and Ouija, it is alleged that the “energy” must be right in order to have things work. In FC, the argument is often made that a skeptic cannot be a facilitator, or that the subject cannot perform in a testing situation. It is also reported that the subject sometimes cannot have a parent as the facilitator, “because the parent is for love,” “because the parent can’t be trusted,” or for various other reasons.

In Ouija, the explanation for the effect is either that another spiritual world has been contacted or that the messages are coming from an unconscious or preconscious level of the subject. In FC, no explanation has so far been offered, although often the process is referred to as magical or it is said that no explanation is needed if it works.

The argument has been used that because the messages often contain typographical errors, phonetic spellings, or unusual utterances, it cannot be the facilitator sending them. However, compare this claim to the observations of James Merrill, who used Ouija to compose poetry: Hunt (1985) says: “Merrill describes the originals as looking like the compositions of children, all ‘drunken lines of capitals lurching across the page, gibberish,’ until punctuated and divided into words, sentences, and paragraphs.”

The messages in both cases are interpreted post hoc. Once a message is received, its meaning is looked for. For example, in FC, the message “ju” was interpreted as the word “juice” when a boy with autism was asked what he had for breakfast. In another example, “ju” was interpreted to mean “jump” in response to the question,
In January 1992, Catherine Koffs, her husband Steve, and their three-year-old autistic daughter, Missy, attended a Facilitated Communications (FC) workshop in Philadelphia. They paid $250 to attend a lecture and private FC session.

Koffs reports that the facilitator held Missy's right hand inside her own, with only the child's limp index finger protruding. Missy allegedly answer the question “What is your name?” by typing “MITSSTY” on the alphabetic keyboard.

“It looked like the facilitator was doing the typing,” says Koffs. With FC, Missy also identified ‘BILG BIRD,’ and her sister, “JENNZ” (Jenny). She also asked for a “SNAC.” “That still bothers me,” Koffs says. “We didn’t use the word ‘snack’ around the house. That’s not a Missy word; that’s a teacher word.” But the facilitator suggested that the young child “has been reading for a long time” and “knows a lot.”

Despite her initial skepticism, Koffs wondered if she had witnessed a miracle. “I loved it,” she says. “I walked out of there thrilled.” But the thrill faded over time, as Missy’s parents proved unable to reproduce the facilitator’s dramatic results, despite painstaking efforts. Missy shows no interest in the alphabet, let alone evidence of an ability to read.

Catherine Koffs, like many parents and professionals, continues to believe that “there’s something to it,” but describes the persons conducting the workshops as “zealots” and “true believers.” “It looks fishy,” she says, echoing many others.

—Mark S. Painter, Sr.

“What do you want to do today?”

Similarly, in both cases, successes are noted and “failures” ignored. By trying and discarding “wrong” answers, the facilitator can eventually hit upon the “correct” one. This is not as impossible a task as it may seem if you realize that individuals with autism often have incredibly limited repertoires. I know one boy who eats spaghetti and meatballs for dinner every day. In the case regarding the guess that “ju” stood for juice, this boy usually had only one of two drinks for breakfast—water or juice. Typically the facilitator is someone who has worked with the autistic person in other contexts. To claim that the facilitator did not suspect that this boy might have had juice would be begging the question. Interestingly, the boy did not have juice or water for breakfast that day, his mother told me. He had rhubarb pie! She had said nothing about this earlier, however, because she didn’t want to embarrass the facilitator in public, she said.

It is hard to test whether or not a facilitator has had prior knowledge relating to a particular message or answer. Again, facilitators may often have knowledge without being aware of it. One way to test the foreknowledge factor would be to set up a situation in which the person with autism would know the correct response, but the facilitator would not. The messages tested would have
FC and the Parent

Professionals are very quick to dismiss the abilities of autistics. Our children are often tagged with the additional label of "mentally retarded." Parents know better. We live with autistics. We see their sly smiles, the gleam of intellect in their eyes, and their astute problem-solving skills. We see when the "nonverbal" autistic child perks up at the mention of the word "cookie," or spontaneously breaks out into song.

So when Facilitated Communication (FC) proponents say they have found a way around the wall, parents are quick to believe. FC confirms our faith in our children. But...

The workshops and sessions can cost $250. The equipment $800 more. And what do we get for our money? Parents themselves "can't facilitate," they tell us. Our children will require FC for life, they say, and will never communicate on their own. If a parent has the temerity to ask the child a question the facilitator does not already know the answer to, the parent may be told that "autistics don't like to be tested," or that testing is against the FC "philosophy."

In short, the price we are asked to pay in an effort to communicate with our children is to allow strangers into our families to mediate our relationships with our own kids and to accept everything the stranger tells us on blind faith.

—Mark S. Painter, Sr.

to be of a simple nature that could be independently verified. Proponents of FC argue, however, that facilitation does not work in a testing situation. Catch 22!

Another interesting point about FC messages: These messages are often given more credibility than the utterances or behaviors of the subject. In one case, a child was asked if he liked ice cream. He said no, and then physically objected to eating it. But the facilitated message read "yes," and the facilitator concluded that the boy really did like ice cream but was just acting stubborn.

The arguments that Ouija can be taken simply as a form of entertainment and that it can't hurt to just try FC whether you believe in it or not are similar. However, the no-harm contention is simply not true—both Ouija and FC have the potential for harm to the subject and to others. There is a seductive quality to both techniques that can lead to obsessional and exclusionary activity. Writes Hunt (1985): "The more suggestible a 'player,' the more dangerous the Ouija game. In the early stages of obsession or possession, its victim becomes increasingly reliant on the Ouija Board. He craves more and more revelations. Soon the messages become the experimenter's sole interest. Normal activities and relationships become less important and even boring. The victim feels alive and alert only when working with the Ouija Board." A similar phenomenon takes place when FC is used for individuals with autism. There is a passionate excitement associated with the "discovery" or notion that a person often thought to be retarded may in fact be a genius who just needed a way to
communicate. One mother said she was skeptical, but once you start, you can't go back. Another mother said her daughter asked via FC for a hiatus from all other forms of education until she found herself. Other mothers at the meetings asked how they could get FC as part of their child's IEP (individual education plan). Another woman is dropping all behavioral techniques for her son in favor of FC. "They didn't teach him how to read or write after five years of behavioral training and he shows he did this on his own with FC," she complained. "So why go back to behavioral techniques?"

It should be pointed out, however, that the consensus among scientists is that so far behavioral techniques are the only methods that have shown any success with changing for the better the behaviors of individuals with autism.

Rimland (1992), in the Autism Research Review, reports several cases of misuse of FC that have led to disasters for some families in the United States and Australia. "In case after case, poorly trained, overzealous facilitators have uncovered, they believe, evidence of child molestation by family members. They report the parents to the authorities and then the nightmare begins." Some cases have been dropped at pretrial stages, but others have involved lengthy legal trials, and some are still in court.

In one interesting case of alleged abuse uncovered via FC and reported in the Autism Research Review (6[1], 1992), FC was tested by an independent agency under a number of conditions: (1) The subject and the facilitator could hear the questions. (2) The facilitator heard music through headphones while the subject heard the questions. (3) Both the facilitator and the subject, wearing headphones, sometimes heard the same questions and sometimes different questions. In the first condition, the subject got 8-9 of 10 correct. In the second condition, she got none correct. In the third condition, she got 4 out of 10 correct when she heard the same questions as the facilitator; but none of her responses were correct when she heard a question different from the one the facilitator heard. However, four of these incorrect answers were the correct answers to the questions received by the facilitator.

Why is Facilitated Communication being accepted so uncritically by the families of autistic children? Certainly the answer lies in the fact that autism is viewed in catastrophic terms. In many studies comparing the stress caused by having a child with autism with that of having a child with Down's syndrome or a terminal disease, autism always ranks highest. It is extremely difficult to be the parent of an autistic child; I know from empirical studies, and I have experienced this anguish in my personal life. There is nothing I would like more than to have FC work as it is claimed to work. But unfortunately, not only do these powers not hold up under examination, they may lead one down a dead end or even a perilous road.

Bibliography


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