



H E A D L I N E S

Free Speech

*Experts take sides
over facilitated
communication.*

Over the last year, a steady stream of news reports have challenged the legitimacy of facilitated communication (FC), a technique now widely used to enable people with autism and others with limited speech to communicate with the aid of another person—a facilitator—and a computer or letter board. While there has also been positive media coverage, it is the negative reports that have framed the current debate, helped precipitate

FC to this country in 1989, says the method raises “fundamental questions about the nature of retardation, how people learn, and how they are judged.”

A leading FC opponent, Howard Shane, holds a Ph.D. from Syracuse, as does Biklen. Shane, who directs a clinic at Boston Children’s Hospital that devises voice synthesizers and other devices to help those with disabilities to communicate, argues FC is “a cult phenomenon or a delusion.” He believes the vast majority of kids using FC are mentally retarded.

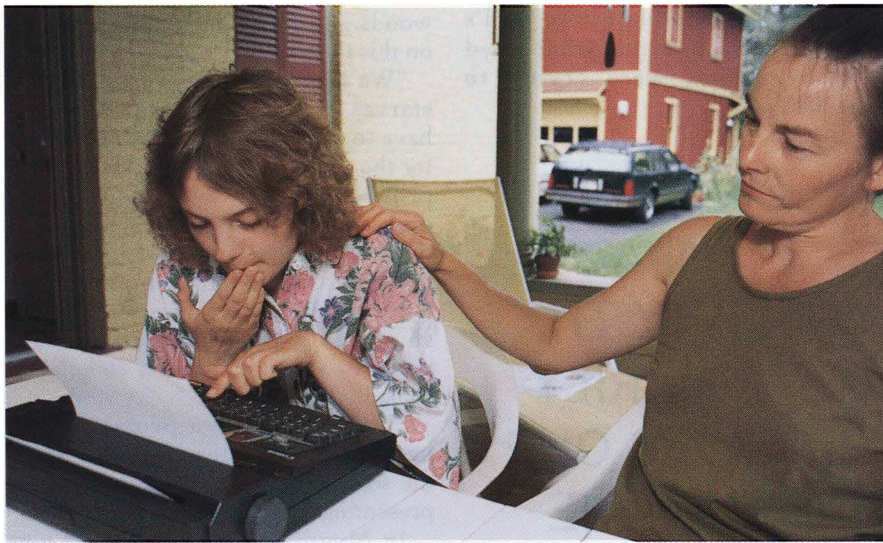
That was also the conclusion of Jon Palfreman, PBS producer of *Frontline’s* “Prisoners of Silence,” the strongest media attack on FC. Palfreman, who also assisted CBS’s *60 Minutes* in its damning report, labels FC “a dog and pony show,” and a “fringe” science equivalent to flying saucers. *Frontline* contended Syracuse teaches “a technique that all the scientific evidence says is not real.”

But it is the nature and use of this “scientific evidence” that has itself become the hub of much of the controversy. *Frontline* and other negative reports cite a picture recognition test done by the O.D. Heck Developmental Center in Schenectady, New York. O.D. Heck ceased using FC and advised other state-funded institutions to follow suit after 12 autistic people failed to respond correctly in testing unless the facilitator knew the answer. It concluded those results “strongly suggest the presence of facilitator influence.”

O.D. Heck’s study, however, was far from conclusive. The institution failed to provide videos of its tests, making it impossible for its test procedures to be independently evaluated. And a preliminary O.D. Heck report, never publicly released, states the autistic participants “disliked the research or would refuse to cooperate on certain days.”

Those tested typed comments such as “this is insulting, you must think I’m stupid,” and “I hate doing this, I gave you the wrong answers on purpose.” These remarks were omitted from O.D. Heck’s final report; Heck contends they were typed by the facilitators, not the subjects.

FC proponents believe this kind of



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Lucy Harrison types while her mother rests a hand on her shoulder. Such contact, says Douglas Biklen, director of SU’s Facilitated Communication Institute, gives those with autism the confidence they need to communicate. Others disagree.

several lawsuits, and caused profound reverberations within the autistic community.

While the technique is simple—the facilitator braces the communicating person’s hand, wrist, or elbow to smooth out and slow down jerky and impulsive movements—the controversy over FC is not. At its core are two basic issues: 1) whose words are being typed, those of the the facilitator’s or those of the person with disabilities?; and 2) the mental capability of the subject. Is there an intelligent mind inside that often-disabled body or, as believed for decades, are most people with autism also mentally retarded?

Syracuse University is in the eye of the FC storm. The country’s leading proponent, Douglas Biklen, is a professor of special education at SU, where he heads the Facilitated Communication Institute. Biklen, who first introduced

testing is inappropriate because people with autism easily become anxious and agitated and can have difficulty coming up with the right words.

"The test situation itself is difficult for autistic people and the test was not life-like," explains Wilma Jozwiak, a New York State special education trainer. People with autism function best in familiar surroundings where the test is incorporated into daily routines or where they have had weeks of practice, she says. This is why Syracuse's FC Institute and many other institutions videotape facilitation sessions, keep careful records of typed messages, and continually analyze results.

Chapman University researchers in Orange, California, recently finished the largest known validation study to date, testing 13 students with disabilities using FC. The study combined clinical methods with a classroom setting and repeated practice sessions. Under stringent standards, a majority of the students successfully performed the test.

The critics also have ignored the growing numbers of people with autism who can type independently. Shane and Palfreman, among others, argue these youngsters are somehow being cued by facilitators, even when there is no physical contact. A recently completed FC Institute training video clearly illustrates the progress people are making toward independence and shows one student typing with no physical support from a facilitator. *Frontline* and *60 Minutes* had shown footage but chose not to use it.

Critics have demanded SU close its FC Institute. Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw says there are no such plans. "It is very important from the University's perspective to have freedom for research," contends Shaw. "Biklen has published, has gone to conferences, has subjected himself to the marketplace of ideas. This research should not be shut down. It should expand at SU and elsewhere."

Biklen also refuses to back down. "No other approaches to helping people with autism to communicate have been as successful as FC," he says. "Skepticism is good but any attempt to close down the institute is not skepticism, it's closed-mindedness."

—MARTHA HONEY

SCUTTLE BUTT

- ***SU Institutes Sexual Harassment Policy.*** Last fall, SU adopted a new sexual harassment policy for faculty, staff, and students. Since that time, the University's staff and administration have undergone mandatory sexual harassment awareness sessions to create a better educated work force and safe environment on campus. Faculty members are participating in a similar program under the administration of the individual school and college deans. The policy defines sexual harassment as "unwelcome behavior of a sexual nature that relates to gender or sexual identity of an individual and that has the purpose or effect of creating an intimidating or hostile environment for study, work, or social living."
- ***Jensen Named Arts and Sciences Dean.*** After a yearlong search, Robert G. Jensen has been named dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Jensen, who joined SU in 1964 as an assistant professor of geography, served as chair of the geography department from 1973 to 1990. A specialist in economic geography and the former Soviet Union, he was director of the University's Soviet and East European Studies Program from 1968 to 1975. Jensen served as dean of the Graduate School from 1990 to 1993 and has been interim dean of the College of Arts and Sciences since July 1993.
- ***Yenawine Institute Created at School of Social Work.*** Martin and Linda Yenawine have donated \$400,000 to establish the Yenawine Institute for Corporate Community Partnerships in the School of Social Work. The Yenawine Institute will bring together business leaders and social service providers to find practical solutions to many of today's pressing social concerns. The gift is the largest donation to the School of Social Work since 1956, when the Gifford Foundation of Syracuse gave \$400,000 to launch the school's master of social work program.
- ***SU Launches Mortgage Program.*** SU has begun a guaranteed mortgage program for faculty and staff, aimed at ensuring the long-term vibrancy and stability of the residential neighborhood east of campus. The East Neighborhood Guaranteed Mortgage Program, modeled after a highly successful program at the University of Pennsylvania, offers 100-percent financing to faculty and staff interested in buying homes as primary residences in the 75-block area immediately east of campus.
- ***AskERIC Program Nominated for Smithsonian Award.*** An SU Internet-based question-and-answer service designed for K-12 educators has been nominated by NYNEX for a 1994 Computer-world Smithsonian Award. AskERIC is a project of the ERIC Clearinghouse on Information and Technology and provides information on teaching tools and methods to educators worldwide.

