Facilitating communication: the focus on meaningful expression

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Article 3 in the series Facilitating communication in people who have visual impairment and additional needs. All the articles are available to download from my website at

http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/

A list of all the articles in the series is provided on the website.

This article is based closely on a document used to support the Communication Policy adopted at RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning. As Lead Speech and Language Therapist there, I took the lead in writing the original document in 2010.

For further information about RNIB Pears Centre for Specialist Learning, go to www.rnib.org.uk/pearscentre

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Introduction

This article has the following themes: I argue that

- we should focus on meaningful expression for people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities
- communication cannot be taught and that we should facilitate, not teach, new skills
- we should not only facilitate new skills, but also facilitate effective communication at all times
- everyone who comes into contact with a person who has visual impairment and additional disabilities is a facilitator.

The focus on meaningful expression

The commonly held view seems to be that typically developing children understand words and sentences well before they can produce them, and that comprehension remains ahead of expression. This belief is often taken further to support the following argument: that we should focus on comprehension when promoting the skills of people who have communication difficulties. In contrast, I believe we should focus on meaningful expression. I made the case for this many years ago (Bell, 1984).¹

Briefly, I argued that the relationship between comprehension and expression is complex, and that there is usually some comprehension of a feature before it is expressed. I also noted that using features which are not fully understood may actually be important.

I went on to argue that focusing on comprehension is inappropriate, giving several reasons. Crucially, developing a person’s ability to understand words and grammatical forms places him / her in a passive, respondent role. Yet typically developing children acquire communication skills because they are active communicators and use their skills expressively. An essential aspect of that is taking the initiative. Focusing on comprehension would fail to facilitate the ability to initiate ² and thus to

¹ A pdf of this article is available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/
² See article 7 of this series.
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have some control over people and events. Therefore, in order to promote functional communication, we need to focus on meaningful expression.

Facilitating, not teaching, new skills

It is not surprising that many people refer to teaching communication skills. This view is particularly understandable in schools and colleges, as they are, of course, places of teaching and learning. However, as I have argued elsewhere, communication skills cannot be taught (Bell, 1985).

Support for this view is provided by Powell (2000), who was writing about working with children who have autism. He pointed out that, although everything that can be taught can also be learnt, it is not the case that everything that can be learnt can also be taught. This is certainly true of communication skills. For example, a behaviour included in some sequences of early development is *When distressed, is comforted by a gentle voice*. This appears to be a stage in typical development and may be important for communication acquisition. But how could this be taught, especially to someone who seldom, if ever shows distress? Deliberately causing distress, of course, could never be justified.

It is not just very early skills that cannot be taught. For example, competent users of spoken English implicitly know the rule that requires the subject of a statement to precede the verb. But few people are consciously aware of this rule, and typically developing children do not learn to produce statements because they are taught to use it.

As noted above, taking the initiative is an essential skill. This cannot be taught. Nor can spontaneous expression, as this is under the control of the person whose skills we wish to promote.

Another reason expressive communication cannot be taught is that communication is required at all times, not only in any sessions set aside for it and in which it is made the focus.

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3 See article 8 of this series.
4 A pdf of this article is available at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/
Taking the view that expressive communication cannot be taught could be taken as rather negative. It might logically be extended to argue that there is nothing we can do to bring about progress in the communication skills of people who have visual impairment and additional needs. But that is far from the case. Communication is of such fundamental importance that we cannot sit back and do nothing. But we do need to be realistic.

Although expressive communication skills cannot be taught, that does not mean they cannot be learnt. As Powell states, what practitioners need to do is organise a context that is conducive to learning without actually teaching.

My view is that instead of teaching expressive communication, we need to provide a context in which the people we support can acquire new communication skills. Providing such a context involves employing strategies that are more subtle than those usually associated with teaching. It also requires that the key principles of facilitating communication are fully adopted. Employing these strategies and adopting these principles enables us to support people to acquire new communication skills.5

Facilitating effective communication at all times

But our role with regard to communication needs to be wider than just facilitating the acquisition of new skills. This is because communication permeates everything that goes on throughout every day – it is central to establishing and maintaining relationships, to personal care activities, to leisure activities and to all learning. It is therefore essential that people who have visual impairment and additional needs are constantly supported and we facilitate effective communication at all times.

Facilitating, then, includes both promoting the acquisition of new communication skills and ensuring that there is always effective communication. Those who facilitate communication are facilitators (Bloom and Lahey, 1978).

5 The key principles are outlined in article B at http://ianpbell.wordpress.com/communication-in-vi-children/ and each one is discussed in greater detail in articles 1 – 17.
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Everyone is a facilitator

Because communication does not take place in a vacuum, it is essential to consider not only people who have visual impairment and additional disabilities. Although they must be the main focus, we also need to consider all those who come into contact with them. Everyone who comes into contact with a person who has visual impairment and additional needs communicates with him / her – everyone is a communicative partner. Every communicative partner has an important role to play in facilitating effective communication. Therefore, everyone is a facilitator.

Depending on the person’s circumstances, his / her facilitators may include the parents, siblings and other family members, family friends and neighbours. They will certainly include all the practitioners involved, such as education staff, care workers, therapy staff, etc. In other words, every practitioner who comes into contact with a person who has visual impairment and additional needs is a facilitator.

Concluding remarks

In summary, then, we should

- focus on meaningful expression
- facilitate, not teach, new communication skills
- facilitate effective communication at all times
- recognise that everyone who comes into contact with a person who has visual impairment and additional disabilities is a facilitator.
References

Bell, I.P. (1984) ‘The focus on meaningful production.’ Mental Handicap, 12, December, 155-159  
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