

# Practicing Message-Passing Skills

*By Zachary S. Rossetti, Pascal Cheng, Harvey F. Lavoy*

The ability to share information with others who we communicate with is an everyday communication skill. Instances of message-passing in our daily lives occur when we take a phone message and pass that on to another person, when we tell others about our work or school day, and when we see a movie and tell others about it. Message-passing is an important communication skill that is part of the individualized skill-building required to develop communicative competence (Beukelman & Mirenda, 2005; Light, 1989).

For individuals who use supported typing/facilitated communication, the act of message-passing has particular relevance because of its implications for the individual to demonstrate authorship of their communication. Due to the presence of physical support, the question of authorship in supported typing has been a controversial issue for some people. Some researchers have suggested that communication facilitators affected the content of messages rather than the communicators themselves (e.g., Wheeler, Jacobson, Paglieri, & Schwartz, 1992).

There are several ways of demonstrating authorship in supported typing. These include:

- Video eye tracking of communicators identifying letters before typing them (Emerson, Grayson, & Griffiths, 2001)
- Linguistic analysis of typed messages revealing communicators' unique uses of language (Niemi & Karna-Lin, 2002; Tuzzi, 2009)
- Evidence of speech before and during typing (Broderick & Kasa-Hendrickson, 2001; Kasa-Hendrickson, Broderick, & Hanson, 2009)
- Portfolios containing naturally occurring and school-based (academic) evidence of authorship (Biklen, Saha, & Kliewer, 1995)
- Message-passing (Cardinal, Hanson, & Wakeham, 1996; Sheehan & Matuoizzi, 1996; Weiss, Wagner, & Baumann, 1996)

In supported typing, message-passing is the skill of conveying previously unknown information to another (Intellectual Disability Review Panel, 1989; Shevin & Schubert, 2000). In message-passing tasks, the communicator communicates information which is unknown to their facilitator. This response could be in the form of pointing to a picture, symbol, or word or typing a word, phrase, or statement of which the facilitator is unaware. The ability to accurately convey information under these conditions demonstrates that the communicator is the author of their communication and can provide examples of the "validity of their communication over time."

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, this ability to do message-passing must also be looked at within the broader framework of communication competencies. In other words, message-passing is a communication skill that allows an individual to participate more independently in his or her everyday life. Developing the skill of message-passing would allow someone to describe what he or she did over the weekend, order a desired meal, discuss a

television program his or her facilitator had not seen, and ultimately, to communicate and interact with others more consistently and frequently.

By viewing message-passing as a skill that individuals who use supported typing must learn, it is important that a plan be developed with the individual's team which outlines how they will learn this skill. Formalizing the practice of this skill could be including it in the communication portion of one's Individualized Education Program (IEP), Individualized Service Agreement (ISA), or Individualized Service Plan (ISP).

It is critical that the plan for working on this skill be part of a broader plan of communication skill development which would include goals for the fading of physical support and the achievement of independent typing, as well as goals for the development of communication within social and learning contexts. It is also critical that this skill be worked on within a framework of the individual having access to regular communication instruction and access to trained facilitators who work with the individual on a regular basis.

In terms of the actual development of this skill, message-passing can be practiced in several ways. We recommend a combination of the following:

### **Incidental or naturally occurring opportunities**

Message-passing can occur any time the facilitator is unaware of the content of communication and it is confirmed. Here are some examples:

- In academics, study with one facilitator and take a test with another.
- Discuss what one did over the weekend with a teacher or facilitator on Monday.
- Look for opportunities to ask about unknown information such as what one had for dinner the night before, a sporting event or concert he or she attended, a book or magazine article he or she read, etc.

### **Formal training sessions**

Practice a series of message-passing tasks (see below) that reflect the variety of messages used in everyday communication.

- Schedule message-passing practice sessions consistently as formal work sessions in a known setting where work is typically completed such as a school classroom or a speech therapist's office.
- Schedule the sessions at a time the communicator works best, considering maximum focus, possible distractions, hunger, and sensory needs.

## Message-Passing Tasks

### Words

- Consists of the presentation of 10 high frequency words from graded lists (e.g., Dolch). The criterion for success is a word typed with minimal misspelling.
- For example, “windohw” **would** be accepted as correct because even with the extra letter, “h,” it is clear that the word is “window.”
- A response like “whdin” **would not** be acceptable because the response is unclear enough that there could be multiple interpretations of what it is.

### Pictures

- Consists of the presentation of five publicly available color photographs that include a clear subject (human or animal) engaged in one specific action. The prompt for each item is, “What is happening in the picture?”
- The criterion for success is a phrase or sentence identifying the subject in the picture (e.g. woman, boy, animal) and the action happening (e.g. walking, running, eating).

### "I have something to tell you"

- Consists of three original statements the communicator wants to tell the naïve facilitator. The prompt for this task is, “What do you want to tell [the naïve facilitator]?”
- For example, the communicator could share a piece of news, make a comment about something he/she recently did, or make a request for something.
- The criteria for success are phrases that resemble or reflect the content of the original message.

### Short story

- Consists of a non-fiction short story of two to four paragraphs followed by five to seven comprehension questions.
- The comprehension questions should be designed to be factual in nature so they could not be answered through inference or general knowledge by the facilitators. They should be written so knowledge of a correct answer in an earlier question would not relate to a future response, limiting potential influence by facilitators. The questions should be written so they do not require correct answers to be able to move on to the next one.
- The criteria for success are correct answers to comprehension questions and/or incorrect answers that resemble the original response.

## Newspaper articles

- Consists of two articles from “News for You,” a commercially available newspaper designed for secondary level English Language Learners. The newspapers include age-appropriate content with lower reading levels.
- The prompt is one of the following: “What is the article about?” Or, “What was interesting about that article?”
- The criteria for success are phrases that resemble or reflect the content of the original message.

These are a sampling of tasks that could be used in the practice of message-passing skills. At the outset of training in these skills, it will be necessary to explore several different kinds of tasks with an individual to see what they feel most comfortable doing. The input of the communicator is critical in this process and they must be given regular opportunities to provide feedback on the process. As they build confidence with success on one task, they can move on trying others. Collect all attempts and evidence of message-passing (incidental and formal) in a communication portfolio.

## Procedure

1. The two facilitators decide which roles they will play. One facilitator acts as the *support facilitator* (aware of the items) during the practice. The other facilitator acts as the *naïve facilitator* (unaware of the items).
2. The naïve facilitator leaves the room out of hearing distance.
3. The support facilitator asks the communicator what task he or she wants to practice.
4. The support facilitator and communicator review the specific items of the task and then practice typing the word or statement.
  - a. This is done to obtain a clear understanding of procedural expectations, gain comfort with the specific item, and reduce stress or anxiety just as one might do in practicing for a test by taking sample test questions.
  - b. This also allows communicators to practice the movement patterns involved in typing each specific item to accommodate difficulty with motor planning or praxis.
5. When the communicator has practiced typing the item and is ready, alert the naïve facilitator to return to the room.
6. The naïve facilitator verbally prompts the communicator to, “Type what you practiced.”
  - a. The naïve facilitator provides the usual or typical facilitation including emotional, physical, and message supports.
7. The support facilitator provides feedback about whether each trial (attempt) is correct.
  - a. If correct, the support facilitator verbally prompts them to move on to the next item: “That’s it. Let’s try the next one.”

- b. If incorrect, the support facilitator verbally prompts them to try again: “That’s not it. Try again. Type the word/phrase you practiced.”
  - c. If incorrect but the communicator typed the correct first letter, the above prompt would also include, “Start with [the correct letter that had been typed].”
  - d. Partially correct responses (some but not all of the information from the original statement) are noted, but scored as incorrect.
8. Communicators are given three trials per item, unlimited time, and breaks as necessary.
  - a. This is done to minimize frustration and anxiety for the communicator.
9. When the communicator types a correct trial or three unsuccessful trials, he or she moves to the next item, repeating steps 2-7.

## The Role of the Facilitator

Developing this communication skill of message-passing includes - and depends on – committed and consistent facilitators. It can be uncomfortable during this process to explore areas of improvement and potential influence as a facilitator, but it is necessary to do so. Facilitators can improve the quality, amount, and types of support they provide while practicing message-passing skills, which will also improve the communicator’s message-passing as well.

## Concluding Thoughts

Practicing message-passing skills is challenging work, and it has been linked to the controversy surrounding authorship in supported typing. We recommend that you focus on developing the skill as opposed to “testing” for authorship. Practicing this skill inherently feels like a test and can cause anxiety for both the communicator and the facilitator. Minimize this anxiety by framing these sessions as skillbuilding. We also recommend that you take the long view of this process. Some communicators have developed independent typing after years of facilitation. Similarly, developing consistency and accuracy in conveying unknown information will take lots of dedicated practice.

## References

- Beukelman, D. R., & Mirenda, P. (2005). *Augmentative and alternative communication: Supporting children and adults with complex communication needs, Third Edition*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
- Biklen, D., Saha, N., & Kliewer, C. (1995). How teachers confirm authorship of facilitated communication. *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, 20*, 45-56.
- Broderick, A., & Kasa-Hendrickson, C. (2001). "Say just one word at first: The emergence of reliable speech in a student labeled with autism. *The Journal of the Association for People with Severe Handicaps, 26*, 13-24.
- Cardinal, D. N., Hanson, D. & Wakeham, J. (1996). *Investigation of authorship in facilitated communication. Mental Retardation, 34*, 231-242.
- Emerson, A., Grayson, A., & Griffiths, A. (2001). Can't or won't? Evidence relating to authorship in facilitated communication. *International Journal of Language & Communication Disorders, 36*, 98-103.
- Kasa-Hendrickson, C., Broderick, A. A., & Hanson, D. (2009). Sorting out speech: Understanding multiple methods of communication for persons with autism and other developmental disabilities. *Journal of Developmental Processes, 4*, 116-133.
- Light, J. (1989). Toward a definition of communicative competence for individuals using augmentative and alternative communication systems. *Augmentative and Alternative Communication, 5*, 137-144.
- Niemi, J. & Karna-Lin, E. (2002). Grammar and lexicon in facilitated communication: A linguistic authorship analysis of a Finnish case. *Mental Retardation, 40*, 347-357.
- Sheehan, C. & Matuoizzi, R. (1996). Investigation of the validity of facilitated communication through the disclosure of unknown information. *Mental Retardation, 34*, 94-107.
- Tuzzi, A. (2009). Grammar and lexicon in individuals with autism: A quantitative analysis of a large Italian corpus. *Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 47*, 373-385.
- Weiss, M., Wagner, S., & Bauman, M. (1996). A validated case study of facilitated communication. *Mental Retardation, 34*, 220-230.
- Wheeler, D. L., Jacobson, J. W., Paglieri, R. A., & Schwartz, A. A. (1992). *An experimental assessment of facilitated communication*. Schenectady, NY: O.D. Heck/Eleanor Roosevelt District Developmental Services Office.