

# Symbols in practice: a discussion paper about the use of symbols for communication by people with learning difficulties

Edited by  
Andrea Whittaker

March 1999

## Contents

|  |    |
|--|----|
| Symbols in practice: a discussion paper about the use of symbols for communication by people with learning difficulties..... | 1  |
| Title pages .....  | 2  |
| Section 1 .....  | 3  |
| The development of pictorial symbols.....  | 3  |
| Section 2.....   | 6  |
| Introduction .....   | 6  |
| Knowledge and information about symbols .....  | 6  |
| Achieving a national consensus.....  | 7  |
| Lack of research.....  | 7  |
| Which system? .....  | 8  |
| Who should develop the use of symbols?.....  | 8  |
| Design and use of symbols.....   | 9  |
| The symbol that hurt Suzie .....   | 9  |
| Something isn't working .....  | 9  |
| Future development of symbol vocabularies.....   | 10 |
| The need for training .....  | 10 |
| Collaboration between stakeholders.....  | 11 |
| Copyright issues.....  | 11 |
| Wider use of symbols generally .....   | 11 |
| Towards a world of accessible information.....   | 12 |
| What services can do .....   | 13 |
| An action point summary.....   | 15 |
| Conclusions .....  | 16 |
| Further developments.....  | 16 |
| Appendix I: Symbols in Practice Conference - The Way Forward.....  | 17 |

## Title pages

The King's Fund has produced limited numbers of this discussion paper as a contribution to sharing knowledge of and widening the debate around issues concerning the use of symbols

No further copies are available from the King's Fund but the document may be freely photocopied.

For further information about work related to symbols please contact people on the list of participants at the back of the document.

This document

For the benefit of readers who are not familiar with recent developments in symbol use, section one presents an overview of the current situation and factors leading to the decision to hold the seminar. By the time of the seminar, twelve important issues had been identified. These were given to delegates to consider before the day and are incorporated in section two of the report.

## Section 1

### The development of pictorial symbols

#### **The right to communicate**

Communication is vital to all of us. Communication is a human right: the right to express ourselves; the right to be informed; the right to have a say in our lives; and the right to have a 'voice'; which, amongst other things, includes the right to use a language of our own choosing. These rights have not always been realised: for example the right of deaf people to use alternatives to speech such as signing, has not always been recognised and made available.

People with a learning disability may be unable to express their views and communicate through the written word which is so prevalent in our society. Alternatives such as pictorial symbols, can provide a tool for enhancing communication

#### **What are symbols for communication?**

Symbols have been used throughout the ages as a means of communicating in a simple and direct way. Today we see symbols in many areas of everyday life, such as road signs, labeling and in warning notices. Many symbols are used internationally to overcome language barriers, whilst others are used by specific disciplines or communities for more specific purposes.

Some symbols are very specific, such as company logos, which may be learned by association with a product. Others are more generic, such as the symbols for 'toilet' 'exit' and 'lift'. Pictorial symbols, which illustrate an object or action can be easy to recognise, such as 'cat', 'house', 'swim'. Other symbols may be used to represent more abstract ideas, and will require teaching and learning. Their pictorial nature, however, can make them easier to recognise than printed text.

There are broadly three types of 'symbols' in use. One type is very pictorial, more like illustrations. These may be easy to recognise, but are largely confined to representations of objects or actions, and may be too specific to contribute to a generic system supporting language development. At the other end of the spectrum are abstract symbols, such as Bliss, which have linguistic flexibility but are less easily recognised, especially by people who have cognitive disabilities

Symbols which lie between these two limits are generally referred to as pictorial symbols. As far as possible the symbols are based on simple line drawings which could be hand drawn, and are designed to be generic – so 'dog' for example is used to represent all dogs, rather than any particular type of dog. Pictorial symbols also include abstract symbols which represent concepts that cannot be illustrated, and include additional detail to make them easier to understand. For example the generic symbol for building is used as the basis for a range of buildings - e.g. a building with a book inside is a library, with a teacher inside is a school. The generic shop symbol may be qualified by the addition of a shoe for shoe shop, vegetables for a green grocer, etc.

There is not one single symbol set, because various people or organisations have developed symbols to meet their own particular approaches or needs. However there are three main

systems in use in the UK at the present time. These are The Makaton Vocabulary, Rebus Symbols and Picture Communication Symbols (Mayer-Johnson).

### **Symbols for direct communication and symbols for information.**

For many years the principal use of symbols was in direct communication as a support or alternative to speech. They were used as part of a total communication approach involving speech, manual signs and \_ pictorial symbols. The vocabularies for any individual were often fairly small, and a symbol may have been used to represent either a single word or a whole idea or 'message'

Recent pressures in education and in independent living have required more extensive vocabularies, and access to written material. This has influenced a rapid development in symbol vocabularies.

Information technology and the development of computer software have revolutionised the ability to reproduce and use symbols easily and consistently and can enable symbol users to write in symbols.

This paper is mainly concerned with the use of symbols to help people with learning disabilities to communicate but experience shows that symbols can bring benefits for many people, across a wide range of abilities. The benefits may be immediate, and they can transform someone's quality of life.

### **Examples of how symbols have helped individuals**

#### **1. Helping direct communication:**

John shows that he does understand. John is a member of a 'skills for self-advocacy course. When John speaks he always repeats the last thing that somebody has said to him. This makes it very difficult for him to participate in the sessions, and the teacher for the group couldn't tell how much John understood.

Then they decided to put together a booklet with guidelines, and written with symbols and pictures. John was able to read the booklet, symbol by symbol. As the teacher reported, "it was a revelation!"

#### **2. Providing information:**

Gary is a member of a college group for people who have learning difficulties. Each week the group decides the programme of activities, and who will take charge of the various jobs which need to be done. The group makes these plans by using a mixture of words for the names of people in the group, and symbols for the activities. When the decisions have all been made, everyone gets a copy of the plan printed from the computer.

Gary has very little speech, so he can't easily join in the discussion round the computer. The tutor used to think that he didn't really understand what was being said or decided. But then one week Gary came to the tutor with his copy of the plan. By pointing at the symbols on the plan, he made it clear that he knew very well what it said. It said that he'd been left out of the cooking rota, and he wasn't happy about it.

#### **3. Communicating at a distance:**

Sam attends a residential school. He recently started to write letters home to his family using symbols. This contact means a great deal to Sam's mother, she feels more in touch with what he is doing. She can write back to him in symbols, keeping the family relationship alive even when they are not together.

[The next page contains an illustration of the letter Sam sent, with symbols for the words. The text reads: "Dear Mum, I played football at Bradstow School against the Royal School for the Deaf yesterday after dinner. We won the game 6:5. We were good and I was good. Last night I went to the cinema to see Jumanji. It was good and we went by bus and Sarah drove. See you on Friday, love from Sam."]

4. **Recording achievements:**

Each term pupils at a school write, edit and publish a newspaper using symbols and photographs. This newspaper shows the many achievements and activities of the pupils in school. Copies are circulated to parents and families, giving a sense of pride in the pupils and school. Copies are also distributed amongst the wider community, enhancing the reputation and status of these young people.

## Section 2

### Introduction

Section 1 has shown that the use of symbols is clearly providing many benefits.

Section 2 incorporates the twelve issues which practitioners had identified as requiring particular consideration and which provided the focus for discussions at the seminar. It also covers participants' views on what services can do and their recommendations for action.

### Knowledge and information about symbols

Experience and practice on which to base development is fragmentary and limited.

The seminar began by identifying positive and negative aspects of symbols. There was general enthusiasm about the development of symbol use but the differing experience and practice of group members reflected the general lack of shared knowledge and information in this field

Positive aspects were:

The ability to express our views, and to receive information in ways we can understand, is very closely linked to our basic human rights. The importance of effective and inclusive methods of communication is increasingly recognised by business organisations, government and public services even though the results are still not always successful.

Symbols can help many people, particularly those with learning difficulties and/or communication impairments, to communicate better. With this help:

- people are able to tell others what they want, and to have more control over their lives - for example by explaining what they want, to the staff who support them.
- people understand more about what is happening to them, and so are less likely to be worried unnecessarily. For example, if they are taken on a journey they can find out where they are going
- people can be more involved in discussions about their own future. For example by using symbols to plan and rehearse what they want to say at their own review meetings.
- people are likely to be more self-confident.

In a world where the ability to read and write is highly valued, people who can read and understand symbols are likely to have a higher status than people who cannot read and write at all.

Although some people can read symbols in the same way as text, symbols are more than just a different language on paper. For people who have learning difficulties symbols can also help:

- by communicating an idea or object in a way which is clear to them.
- by making an idea more real, so they don't have to 'keep it in their head'
- by helping them to stay focused on what is being discussed
- by reducing the 'overload' which can be caused by trying to deal with too many ideas at once
- by reinforcing, and continuing to act as a reminder of, key points from a discussion

Experience shows that symbols can bring benefits for many people across a wide range of abilities. The benefits can transform someone's quality of life

Negative aspects of experience and practice in the use of symbols were demonstrated by the variety of ways people were trying to help people communicate, often selecting, adapting, inventing and re-inventing symbols from many sources.

### **David and the trains**

David is an eight year old boy who doesn't use much speech to communicate. His two great loves are trains, and his playgroup, 'Challengers'. David was constantly going up to his mum and saying "Ch-ch". Mum would explain that they weren't going on the train today, but to the playgroup.

David continued saying "Ch-ch", Mum started worrying about David's increasing obsession with trains, and wondered whether she should take down the pictures of trains in his bedroom.

Eventually one day When David was , saying "Ch-ch" and his mum was talking about trains, David went off and brought back the symbol for his playgroup - Challengers. He had a look in his eye which could only have meant, "why do you always talk about trains when I mention Challengers?"

## **Achieving a national consensus**

There is no national consensus on the use of symbols.

At present the use of symbols in the adult sector is mainly confined to organisational or centre based applications, but pictorial symbols are beginning to be introduced at national events and in published materials. This trend is likely to increase. However, it will be impossible for an organisation to send out information made accessible by adding symbols, if every user of symbols has a different set. The answer could be for everyone to use the same set of symbols. This would lose the advantages of making symbols to suit each person. General sets do not have very local or personal vocabulary.

This is one of the most difficult problems for the future development of symbols use and there is no easy answer. The most likely solution would be to agree a standard 'core group' of symbols used by everyone, with extra symbols added for personal and local use.

Well known company logos are ready made symbols which could be added to a national symbol set. Companies would have to be approached for their agreement because of copyright issues. It would make it easier if companies gave general permission for their logos and pictures to be used to help people with communication difficulties.

At the moment it is mainly statutory organisations which have begun to publish information, such as community care plans, in symbols. While it is important that they are attempting to make such information available, it may be more useful for people to know what is on television! A wide range of information-television, cinema listings, community services, benefits leaflets, and much more needs to be provided in more accessible forms.

Perhaps there should be a 'translation service' to assist organisations and businesses.

## **Lack of research**

There is little research into the use of symbols.

There is no easily accessible source of information available about the various symbol sets and related resources that already exist. There is also very little information about which symbols work best or about how to develop good symbols. As a result people are likely to keep 're-inventing the wheel', which is both a waste of time and of other people's experience.

Some people with learning difficulties may use symbols as a 'stepping stone' to full literacy. Careless over-enthusiasm for symbols may mean that people who could become fully literate never get the chance to do so.

We know that many people with less severe learning difficulties can learn to use symbols and their quality of life is improved in many ways. Much of the work in developing symbols has been carried out with this group of people. However, symbols may not be the best way to meet the communication needs of other groups with profound and multiple learning difficulties or additional sensory impairments

All of this underlies the need for more research to identify those people who may benefit most from symbols, and those who may be best helped by using other communication methods. We need more research about the effectiveness of different symbol types and the most appropriate methods of introducing symbols to new users. Money for such study is not readily available

## Which system?

Those responsible for services to people with learning difficulties are confused by what they see as different and competing 'systems'. e.g. in one small area three different 'systems' were being used by three different statutory organisations.

The number of different symbol sets available, coupled with the lack of general agreement and guidance as to their relative merits and use has made it difficult for service providers, however well-intentioned, to choose appropriate and effective ways forward in their desire to make written material more accessible. This situation is now beginning to change.

While some groups have been keen to maintain the use of particular preferred sets, other groups are beginning to mix and match between the different sets. Barriers built up because of specific 'brand loyalty' are beginning to break down. For example, Somerset Total Communication use their own symbols supplemented by Rebus; Rebus and PCS are now published together as effectively a single set in the UK and soon in the US.

## Who should develop the use of symbols?

There is confusion about whose role it is to develop the use of symbols. To some extent this depends on who is available. Speech and language therapists are increasingly employed to work in this field as specialists in communication, but they are also confused by the different options. Teachers, psychologists, nurses, social services staff or specially appointed 'symbols advisers' are some of the professionals who may find themselves in lead roles.

These two issues are related as the choice of symbols used very often depends on the background knowledge, skills and training of the person in the lead role. The lack of a national consensus adds to the confusion. There is a clear need for informed individual assessment to ensure the appropriate and successful use of symbols.

The need for a choice of symbols has to be set against the need to have a set which everyone understands. Concerns about money and copyright are likely to mean that the



number of different sets will increase, but not necessarily in ways which meet the needs of service users

Education, health and social services do not give enough priority to the use of symbols, and do not have clear policies across all agencies. At the moment, the development and support of symbols for communication too often relies on one or two staff who choose to take an interest. If they leave, service users lose their communication. Agencies need to make sure that people who use symbols, and people who could use them, can be certain of getting the help they need.

They need to develop individual assessment, planning and review procedures involving staff who have been trained in symbols use, which will identify the communication needs of service users

## Design and use of symbols

Software tools provide a means by which materials can be easily generated. However, there has been evidence of inexperienced symbols users creating materials without a clear understanding of the language implications, or not selecting the most appropriate symbol for meaning. The impetus for using the symbol often arises from the perceived needs of organisations to attempt to make all their documents, policies and procedures 'user-friendly'. So, for example, complaints procedures or tenancy agreements are produced in a symbol form which may have little or no meaning for those they are intended to assist.

The increasing awareness that information should be provided in ways that are accessible to everyone is very welcome but it can lead to bad practices by people who think that symbols are an easy answer. It also seems that there are some people who are not really interested in making information accessible, but just want to look as if they are. Sometimes, people 'throw a few pictures at a page' in the hope that they will make a document understandable. They may use computer software to 'translate' a document into symbols without having any training in the appropriate use of such software. At worst this results in a 'tokenism'- going through the motions of empowerment without ensuring that people can use the tools to express their views effectively. There is no point in making documents 'accessible' unless they reach the people who need the information.

Unskilled use of symbols can also cause problems. For example, it is dangerous to assume that everyone sees the same meaning in a picture or symbol. Because their message is visual, symbols can be very blunt and this may be distressing. As Suzie's story shows, symbols which seem harmless can also cause unexpected distress.

### The symbol that hurt Suzie

The people who help Suzie to communicate needed to give her a symbol for 'pack' So they chose a picture of dogs: a pack of dogs. What they didn't realise was that Suzie had once been attacked by a dog, and so seriously hurt that she still carried the scars. They didn't understand why she became very upset when they showed her the symbol.

### Something isn't working

The residents at the home for people with learning difficulties didn't know how to use the hi-fi, so every time they wanted some music they had to ask the staff for help. And that was a nuisance for everyone So the staff drew some symbols explaining how to use the hi-fi, and stuck the sheet of paper on the side of the equipment.

Strangely, none of the residents started putting on music. They didn't even ask the staff to turn it on.

It took a while for the staff to understand what had happened. The residents hadn't looked at the symbols on the paper. They'd just seen the paper stuck there, and assumed it said, "Out of Order".

Although symbols and pictures are often used in ordinary life, the symbols and systems used by people with learning difficulties are different, and mark out the people who use them as different. This upsets some people who use symbols, and makes it more difficult to include people with learning difficulties in mainstream activities. For example, in schools and colleges where the aim is to integrate people alongside other students, the use of special books with symbols will tend to set them apart.

For people who need symbols to access information, such disadvantages may be a price worth paying. But symbols can also be a problem, or annoyance, for people who do not need them. This may include people with learning difficulties who can read ordinary text: they may feel they have been unnecessarily 'labelled', and they may also find that the information is more difficult to understand because the symbols have been added. There are also reports of complaints from people with disabilities who have been sent information with symbols — for example in consultation documents — because they felt they were being patronised

Such problems will become less common when symbols are more accepted, and when it is generally recognised that people with learning difficulties have a right to information which concerns them. Even so, they underline the need for care in choosing when to use symbols, and in how they are presented. As far as possible, information should be provided in the way which is most likely to suit the people for whom it is intended. Symbols will also be more acceptable when they are presented as an addition to materials which have general interest, not as special information just for people with special needs.

## Future development of symbol vocabularies

As well as introducing symbol communication to carers and users, thought needs to be given to the future development of symbol vocabularies, to the possible tension between nationally recognisable symbols and the need for regional, local and personal variations. Mechanisms will be needed whereby users can contribute to the design and selection of symbols for their own Purposes,

Many symbols have been developed for the use of just one person. These may include symbols for local places, activities and people. Symbols can be chosen which are most easily understood by the person. There is no problem with this as long as the person remains with people who know and use the same symbols. If the person moves from one part of the country to another or from one service to another, they may find themselves with people who do not know their symbols and cannot communicate with them

## The need for training

People with learning difficulties need access to learning symbols at the appropriate level for their individual ability. All those in contact with them also need training in and knowledge of symbols - how to teach users, how to use appropriate language in different contexts with different users and how to put symbols into practice to enable choice, self expression and independence.

The need for training is evident throughout. Uninformed use of symbols leads to many of the problems already identified. Some ways to avoid bad practice were discussed at the seminar:

- It is important to convert complicated documents into plain English. Symbols cannot on their own, simplify difficult ideas or language. This is a highly skilled job - one person's plain English may be another person's gobbledegook!
- Don't assume that symbols are the right answer for everyone. Different people need different methods depending on their individual abilities. This underlines the importance of every person having an individual assessment.
- Ask the people who need the information. What helps them to understand? (N.B. If they have a communication problem they may not be able to tell us.)

## Collaboration between stakeholders

Software tools which were originally conceived for use in schools in a clear educational environment are being stretched to the limit. New tools are being created but these take time to develop. Tensions between commercial development and widespread access need to be acknowledged. Developers will need to collaborate among themselves and with the communities of users to facilitate coherent provision.

This was not discussed extensively at the seminar, but since then, a number of positive steps have taken place. The Joint publication of Rebus and PCS symbols represents a major collaboration. Makaton and Widgit have been selling each other's products. The symbol software has been significantly improved with consultation with various users and interested parties. For example, at a conference organised by Widgit and hosted by Meldreth Manor School, forty leading practitioners met to exchange practice and contribute to the development of the new software. Other events have been organised by groups such as the ACE Centre, Oxford and CENMAC in London. Widgit attended the Makaton International Conference for consultation about software development.

## Copyright issues

There are issues about copyright which will need to be resolved.

Anyone can use an ordinary language without asking permission, but this is not true for symbols: Each set, and any computer software connected with it, is owned under copyright by the person who designed it, and should not be used without their agreement. This means that people who want to use a set may have to pay for it. It is understandable that people who have worked hard to produce a new set of symbols should want some money in return, especially as that money may be needed to develop further. However, it means that:

- people may decide to invent their own set, rather than pay for one which already exists.
- the aim of making money gets in the way of producing sets which will meet the needs of those who use them.

Concerns about money and Copyright are likely to mean that the number of different sets of symbols may increase. This is not in the interest of service users.

## Wider use of symbols generally

If symbols are to become an accepted support for written language, they need to be seen more widely in the environment. Initiatives should be taken to work with public and private organisations to develop the use of symbols in making information accessible, always avoiding tokenism, as already highlighted.

The use of symbols by people with learning difficulties ( and other disabled people) needs the support of government, business and education, health and social services.

There is not enough support being offered at the moment The lack of support is a sign of 'disableist' attitudes- the belief that people with disabilities should find a way to fit into a world designed for non-disabled people According to that view, if people cannot fit in, it is their problem. So, for example, it is assumed that the ability to read text is the only real form of literacy. However, it is a fact that if people cannot communicate with each other, both sides are 'disabled'

It must be said that the level of support is improving in a number of ways. Health and social services are becoming aware of the need to make the information they produce more accessible to people with learning difficulties, even if very often, their efforts are not successful. The government has also recognised the importance of good communication, and its connection to human rights, although the main concern so far has been to improve communications with ethnic and cultural minorities, rather than with disabled people. More generally, as trade and communications make national boundaries less important, there is a growing understanding that people use many different ways to communicate. So symbols are increasingly being used in public documents, instruction booklets and buildings etc. to overcome language barriers

Symbols, like ordinary text, enable people to write down and read information. As such they provide a form of literacy. Yet it is usually assumed that literacy can only mean the ability to read and write words.

A definition of literacy which excludes symbols has a series of effects:

- It reduces the status of symbols as an alternative to text, and the status of people who have achieved literacy through symbols.
- It means that funding is not available to help people achieve literacy through symbols.
- It stops people who use symbols from accessing jobs or college courses which require them to be literate. This can occur even when someone who uses symbols could actually manage the job or course. Sometimes literacy is only required as proof that a person has the ability to learn.

How Symbols Revived An Interest in Reading

Recently two parents visited — fairly reluctantly — a Special school for pupils with severe learning difficulties, Their daughter has a diagnosis of dyspraxia and they had been informed that she might need to move from her mainstream school to the special school, During discussion they mentioned that they were very worried about her reading. She had always loved being read to but had now lost interest in all books. They put this down to the fact that she knew, from attending school, that she should be reading by herself, but could not and so had given up on books. The parents were lent a copy of one of the Oxford Reading Tree books annotated with symbols. When the father returned he was absolutely delighted, Both parents were amazed at how quickly their daughter had been able to read it, Not only that but she was also showing an interest in other books again.

[Towards a world of accessible information](#)

Symbols are an important part of a larger process of opening up communication to people who cannot see, or cannot understand text, or cannot speak.

There are also other, wider benefits from symbols. As Britain becomes ever more involved in Europe, and as people communicate across the world using the Internet, it becomes increasingly important to find ways of communication which bridge the gap between people who use different national languages. Symbols can help to achieve this. For example, some people with disabilities have prepared messages using symbols, which have then been translated into text, using computer software, and sent over the Internet. Disabled people in another European country receive the messages, and use their own computers to convert them back into symbols they can read. The development of symbols which assist international communication has the potential to be a gift from the community of disabled people to people in general.

New technology can help this process in many ways. For example:

- Computers can translate from text to symbols, and potentially from one symbol's system to another.
- The Internet can be used by disabled people across the world to communicate with symbols, pictures, sounds or text.
- The Internet could include a place on the World Wide Web where people could get information about symbols, and share ideas
- Digital cameras linked to computers now make it much easier to include pictures in documents.

The use of technology in these ways is only just beginning. But that may make it a very good time for people with learning difficulties, and their supporters, to get involved.

On the other hand, it would be a mistake to assume that every communication problem needs an expensive 'hi-tech' answer. Here again, it's important to look at the person's individual needs. There are many people whose lives could be vastly improved by having symbols on paper which give them a way to have a say about their lives.

## What services can do

Services can achieve the development and support of symbols for communication if they:

- Include the use symbols in their job descriptions
- Provide staff training in the use of symbols.
- Ensure that service managers fully understand the importance of symbols, and provide leadership in their use within their service.
- Develop individual assessment, planning and review procedures, involving staff who have been trained in symbols use, which will identify the communication needs of service users.
- Encourage and enable staff, especially speech and language therapists who have skills in using symbols for communication, to help other staff develop the same skills. (rather than acting as the only expert).

It is also important that service agencies in the same area, and their staff, work together to ensure that people who communicate with symbols get support across the range of services they use, and continue to get support if they move to new services.

Education, health and social services in the same locality need to have a joint policy on the development and support of symbols. Staff in these agencies also need to work together to make sure that, when there are changes in the services which a person receives, staff in the

new services have the same skills in using symbols. This is especially important when moving from e.g school to college or day services

These good developments will not happen unless senior managers and policy makers such as councillors are already committed to the use of symbols. Staff, carers and service users may need to raise awareness of symbols and their importance at this level. Stories about how symbols have changed people's lives, and direct contact with people who are communicating with symbols may help to change attitudes. A shock tactic used successfully in one area was to produce the council agenda in Greek which put members into the role of someone unable to read and understand.

It was also suggested that a 'charter mark' might be awarded to organisations which reached a high standard. This method is used in many areas of government and business. The 'crystal mark' award, for example, encourages organisations to use plain English. However, the same kind of award for using symbols would need a national organisation to set the standards and make the awards.

## An action point summary

This section is a list of the action which needs to be taken, based on the earlier sections in this report, and the views of the people at the seminar. Some of the ideas for action may not have been agreed by everyone at the seminar, and many ideas need more discussion to decide exactly what should be done.

1. Information about existing symbol systems needs to be gathered and made available.
2. Research needs to be done to find out which types of symbols suit different users and how to choose the most appropriate type of symbol for different users.
3. People who are developing symbols need to work together to find ways to make them more like a 'language' which everyone knows.
4. Research and discussions about the development of symbols for people with learning difficulties should involve some people who already use them.
5. There should be discussions with people who are developing symbols for use by people with other disabilities, to make sure that the needs of people with learning difficulties are not overlooked.
6. Links also need to be made, for the same reason, with groups which are developing symbols for general public use.
7. Education, health and social services for people who have learning difficulties should make sure that they offer enough help to people who use - or could learn to use - symbols. This will involve:
  - a. including the use of symbols in the job descriptions of staff who work with people who have learning difficulties
  - b. providing training for these staff and for users
  - c. offering leadership at all management levels to develop and support the use of symbols
  - d. making sure that care assessment and \_ individual planning methods identify special communication needs
  - e. agreeing policies on symbols use across all the education, health and social services in the same area
8. Guidelines for good practice in supporting symbols use and development, including staff training, should be agreed and made public. A 'charter mark' system could be set up as an award to organisations which follow good practice.
9. The Government should accept symbols use as a form of literacy, and funding for adult literacy should be made available for the development and use of symbols.
10. Government, businesses and community organisations which publish information about services and leisure facilities should be encouraged to provide information in more accessible versions.
11. Businesses with well-known commercial logos should be asked to give their general agreement to the use of logos and other promotional materials within symbol systems for people with learning difficulties.
12. Money should be found to support the development of information technology to make information more accessible to people who have learning difficulties. This work might include setting up a World Wide Web site where general information about symbols could be found and exchanged.

Some kind of organisation is needed to take action on all these points. Two ways of doing this were suggested:

EITHER one group, made up of people at the seminar, which could then set up groups to take on different parts of the work.



OR several groups, which anyone who went to the seminar could join, to do different parts of the work.

People at the seminar were especially keen to start work on:

- setting up a 'market day' when people would share information and experience about symbols;
- developing guidelines on good practice;
- agreeing a basic 'core' set — or thesaurus - of symbols which everyone could easily understand and use;
- developing links with other groups of disabled people who use symbols.

## Conclusions

It was clear from the discussions that there are many areas which require further study. There is a clear need for policy development at management level, and for the involvement of management in implementation. Training is necessary at all levels. Communication between users, practitioners and developers is needed to avoid some of the conflicting tensions and to bring coherence to symbol use. The overwhelming consensus of those at the seminar was the need for more opportunities to share ideas and practice through networking at all levels, both locally and nationally.

## Further developments

Since the seminar further contact has been maintained between various symbol developers. Other groups have held networking events and are beginning to share their findings through conferences, articles and reports. It is evident that there is a will to pursue this debate in all areas.



## Appendix I: Symbols in Practice Conference - The Way Forward

An Overview by Paul Swift

The letter inviting each of us to attend today reminds us that 'good communication is Vital to all of us'. I would like to take the sentiment further by suggesting we think of communication as a human right. This works in many ways. We take for granted the 'right' to express ourselves, the 'right' to have a say in our lives and the 'right' to a voice - which, amongst other things, includes the 'right' to use a language of our own choosing. We may also think in terms of the 'right' to be heard, the 'right' to a fair hearing, or the 'right' to be understood. Perhaps I am stating the obvious here, but the struggle of the deaf community to define and use their own modes of communication illustrates just how fragile these rights are for less powerful groups in our society.

There is one more thing I want to say about the rights and I hope you will see that it is very pertinent to what we are trying to do today. If we think of rights simply in terms of what is permitted, it places an onus upon those who will benefit from them to "exercise" or 'assert' their rights. The disability movement has shown us that the rights of relatively powerless groups must be actively supported for a society to be able to call itself truly inclusive. We now expect new buildings to accommodate the needs of people with physical disabilities, we expect local authority information to be made available in a variety of languages and we expect there to be a signer here today to help those who are hard of hearing or deaf to exercise their right to a voice. But these changes haven't been inspired by enlightened managers in public service organisations, they come from people challenging existing orthodoxies, most notably representatives of service users.

People First have been instrumental in achieving change, but the double bind for most people with learning difficulties is that they need the tools to express themselves. I would argue that one, if not the, most potent social factor which disables people with a learning disability is the expectation that they will communicate on the terms of those without such disabilities, in much the same way that wheelchair users are 'disabled' only because public facilities tend to be accessible to people who are able to walk.

Most of us work at a very local level with individuals and groups whose needs tend to be contained within a relatively small universe - their homes, work, colleges, day centres and so on. We can help them best by finding out what they know and providing them with the tools to participate in the life of their 'universe'. Like most groups of service users, people with learning difficulties are not an homogenous group, their needs can vary widely and it is vitally important that we start from where the individual is at. Amongst other things, we need to ask what he or she already understands? What he or she will need to know? What will be the most appropriate form of communication for that person and the people he or she will want to communicate with?

It seems to me that we are getting better at identifying and meeting these needs, not least through the use of locally generated symbols, but we are less clever when it comes to supporting people with learning difficulties in asserting their wider rights to be involved in shaping the universes they inhabit. So, while there are very few aspects of the planning and delivery of public services that are not influenced by the views of the users of those services, and service users are regularly involved in training and assessing the people who provide those services, the voice of people with learning difficulties remains relatively muted. This state of affairs exists because powerful national alliances have not only asserted the right of people with disabilities to have a say, they have also ensured that disabled people are equipped with the tools to achieve that end. The problem for many people with learning difficulties is that whatever exists to help them locally, we, the people supporting them, have

failed to achieve consensus on the tools and technologies that would allow more of the active role at a more general level. I believe that the use of symbols will help to move things forward.

The problem then, is that we are the problem. I hope that today we will not just look at ways to help people with learning difficulties by working with them, but also ways to help ourselves. As a researcher who works with people with learning difficulties, I am a user of symbols. A recent piece of research with which I was involved, was examining ways in which service users can assess the work of social work students. We convened a series of groups of service users and carers to view a videotaped interview. The groups were then asked to rate the work of the social worker in the video on a scale of 1 to 5 against fifteen criteria. Conventional research wisdom has it that these groups should operate under the same conditions in order for us to test the validity and reliability of our criteria. This often means that a narrow group of 'more able' people with learning difficulties are invited to take part in such research, or in some instances people with learning difficulties are simply excluded altogether. However, if we agree that all service users have a right to take part in such research, and that our work will be less than comprehensive without their contribution, it is incumbent upon to find ways to enable them to do so.

To ensure that people with learning difficulties would have a meaningful role in the research we employed a speech and language therapist to bring together a group of service users with similar communication skills. She worked with the group for several hours to produce a narrative of the videotaped interview in symbolised form which the viewers and the researcher could then refer to when talking about what the social worker had done. The group rated the worker against a four-point scale depicting symbols for 'very bad', 'bad', 'good' and 'very good'. The process of involving people with learning difficulties in developing relevant symbolised versions of our resources were crucial to the analysis of our findings, not just in demonstrating that it could be done, but also because it made us question our assumptions about the communication needs of users generally: