

Thought and Practice: (1987-1991) the Journal of the Graduate School of Bank Street College of Education

Volume 2 | Number 2


Article 4

1989

Talking with Symbols

Elizabeth Helfman

Follow this and additional works at: <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/thoughtandpractice>

 Part of the [Curriculum and Instruction Commons](#), [Disability and Equity in Education Commons](#), [Educational Methods Commons](#), and the [Pre-Elementary, Early Childhood, Kindergarten Teacher Education Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Helfman, E. (2016). Talking with Symbols. *Thought and Practice: (1987-1991) the Journal of the Graduate School of Bank Street College of Education*, 2 (2). Retrieved from <http://educate.bankstreet.edu/thoughtandpractice/vol2/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Centennial Collection at Educate. It has been accepted for inclusion in Thought and Practice: (1987-1991) the Journal of the Graduate School of Bank Street College of Education by an authorized administrator of Educate. For more information, please contact kfreda@bankstreet.edu.

TALKING WITH SYMBOLS

Elizabeth S. Helfman

How could a classroom be so quiet? The only sounds were the low voices of the teacher and her helpers as they worked with one child at a time. As a research assistant I had visited many classrooms, but never one like this. Seven children, each in a wheelchair, were distributed around a sunny classroom in the school at the Hugh MacMillan Centre in Toronto, Canada. All were victims of cerebral palsy and not one could speak intelligibly. They would try; occasional cries and squeaks would break the quietness.

These children could hear and they certainly understood words. Teacher and helpers talked to them as they might to any child. And, most wonderful of all, the teachers were getting a response. In spite of their inability to speak, these children were communicating with the teachers and, as the day progressed, with each other. Each child was equipped with a set of printed symbols arranged in squares on a board placed across the arms of the wheelchair. I looked. The symbols did not make sense to me at first, but I noted that an equivalent word was printed above each one.

At the top right corner of each board I read: "I communicate with Blissymbols." Several of the children had a further message in a lower corner; this was one: "My name is Laura Williams. I can hear and understand you. I talk by pointing to Blissymbols with the first finger of my left hand. Please pull me up in my chair so I can point better. I love to talk!"

Elizabeth Helfman is the author of nineteen published books for children and young adults, mainly nonfiction. A Bank Street student (1938-39), she taught elementary grades for twelve years before becoming a freelance writer. She also worked part time in research and publications at Bank Street and was a Teaching Guide Editor at Scholastic Magazines.

Not all the children could point with their fingers. One, with his hand doubled into a fist, used a knuckle. Another operated a switch with a push of his knee, thus controlling a light under the symbols on his board. I was to discover that there are many ways of indicating symbols. An adult friend of mine who can move only one leg in her whole body joyfully points to both symbols and letters of the alphabet with her big toe.

The school day for the children I was visiting proceeded in normal fashion. First, each child made a statement or told a story which his helper wrote down in symbols. Some of these were shared; the teacher wrote them on the blackboard and children made comments if they wished.

There was a language and symbol learning session, with scrambled sentences and more symbols to learn. There was also a music class in which the teachers sang and the children joined in as they could; simple arithmetic; and musical story telling period (Aesop this time) in which the children roared when the lion appeared and squeaked for the mouse.

Other activities would follow: lunch, rest, physical therapy, dancing in wheelchairs (Virginia Reel!), and so on. All through the day the children talked to each other across their symbol boards.

As they were wheeled towards the door for lunch a little girl put her arms out to the child nearest her. "Sarah," the teacher said to the other child, "Michelle wants to hug you."

She moved the two wheelchairs as close as possible. But Michelle evidently wanted to say something first. With a shakey finger she pointed to symbols on her board while Sarah and I watched:

I am your friend.
⊥₁ ^
⊙ ⊥₂+ ⊥ ♥+!

Then the two girls hugged arms together across their wheelchairs. Touching is communication, too.

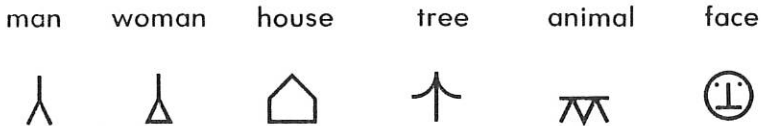
Formerly these children might have sat mute in wheelchairs for years while teachers struggled with picture boards, spelling boards, and whatever else they could think of. Bright children who could not speak were often considered stupid. How could anyone know?

Now, beginning with symbols at an early age, such children can reach out to the world. In time they will learn to read, and to write if they can manage their fingers well enough. Many will continue to find Blissymbols their best means of communication. Of course, this is only one way, not necessarily suitable for all nonspeaking people. Children who have adequate control of their fingers may communicate with the hand signing used by the deaf. Some in fact use both Blissymbols and hand signing, and whatever other gestures may get an idea across. One drawback with signing, however, is that it says nothing to the other person unless he already knows the meaning of the signs. This is less important with Blissymbols since a word is printed above each one.

In our modern world computers and other electronic devices are transforming the lives of many nonspeaking people. (The Apple II computer has been adapted for use with Blissymbols.) Some computers, such as the HandiVoice, actually speak. The more dramatic aspects of this work are shown to us on television, rather than the day by day successes of simpler, less expensive methods. But all this is beyond the scope of this article.

What are Blissymbols? They constitute a logical system of graphic symbols devised by Charles Bliss of Australia for communication across language barriers. The symbols are based on meaning and do not depend on the sound of spoken words. As we have seen, knowing how to read is not required. Thus, nonspeaking children of any age (and adults as well) can "talk" by pointing to symbols arranged on a board, or by using an electronic device or other technical aid.

Whenever possible Charles Bliss made his symbols look like the things they represent. These are *pictographs*.



Some symbols are *ideographs*; they represent ideas.

| | | | |
|-------|---------|------------------------|------------------|
| hello | goodbye | before, in front of | after, behind |
| ○ → ← | ○ ← → | · | · |

| | | |
|------------------------|-------|-----|
| protection (a roof) | happy | sad |
| ∧ | ♡ ↑ | ♡ ↓ |

There are approximately one hundred basic symbol elements in Blissymbolics. These can be combined to make thousands of meanings.

woman protection mother

⊥ and ∧ becomes ⊥∧

Complete sentences can be expressed:

I will come to see you.

⊥₁ → | ^ ⊙ ⊥₂ .

Please read.

!♡ ^ ⊙ ⊥ .

Mr. Bliss had never, even in his wildest dreams, imagined that the handicapped would be the first to spread the knowledge of his symbols all around the world. How did this come about? In 1971 the staff at the Hugh MacMillan Centre in Toronto were looking for some way, any way, to open the world to children with cerebral palsy who could not speak intelligibly. They had tried graphic symbols, but designing them seemed an impossible task. Then one of the teachers, Shirley McNaughton, discovered a book I wrote, *Signs and Symbols Around the World*, published in 1967. Eight pages in this book are devoted to Mr. Bliss's symbol system, then called semantography. These were just the kind of symbols the teachers had been trying to create, and so simple, too—symbols for father, mother, child, and even abstract things like feelings—happiness, sadness, anger. The work in the use of symbols for nonspeaking people began right then. Years of experimentation and adaptation, with the permission and help of Mr. Bliss, followed.

When I visited the classroom at the Hugh MacMillan Centre, I decided to write a book about the symbols and the people who use them. *Blissymbolics: Speaking Without Speech* was published in the spring of 1981. It is aimed at young adults with the hope that some may choose work with the handicapped as a career. Blissymbols are now in use in many parts of the world, not only by children and not only by people who cannot speak clearly.

Gwen Mann was a teacher of special education in a neighborhood school in Markham, near Toronto. When she was told that Kari Harrington would be transferred to her class from the school at the Hugh MacMillan Centre, she learned Blissymbols, so she could understand what Kari was saying. This made the transition easier for Kari, but it did much more. The other children were fascinated by Kari's symbols and wanted to learn them too. Much to her surprise, Mrs. Mann found that some children who had trouble learning to read even the simplest words could learn Blissymbols fast. The difference this made to them was impressive. Instead of struggling with printed words, slowly, ponderously, and failing much of the time, they could understand Blissymbols right away. Success!

There was, for example, Johnnie, a child with aphasia. Symbols helped him to gain confidence in himself, and "talking" with Kari was fun.

Mrs. Mann found that as he learned symbols, Johnnie could be taught the skills he needed to learn to read. Most important, he could tell people how he felt about his world.

Soon Mrs. Mann's classroom was decorated all over with symbols. On one wall was a big symbol display for everyone to see. A weather calendar, as an ongoing project of both children and teacher, took up part of another wall. Each symbol on the calendar—for sun, rain, snow, ice, and so on—looked like a simplified picture of what it was meant to be.



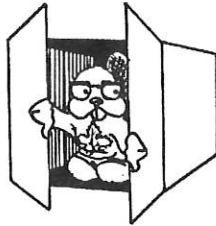
Lists of words and symbols in various categories were posted around the room: home, school, months, seasons. In time everyone would learn to read; the progress was from symbols to words.

Each child who was using symbols had his own folding symbol display and a book with his symbols and words. Flash cards helped the children to learn sentences. Many of the exercises prepared for the children by Mrs. Mann were similar in plan to those found in standard reading workbooks, but she had to create these. Before long she had persuaded her husband, Andy, to work with her on producing six reading workbooks with both words and symbols. These were printed by the University of Toronto Press for the Easter Seal Communication Institute, the organization that is authorized to standardize symbols, create new ones, and distribute them, as well as train teachers in their use.

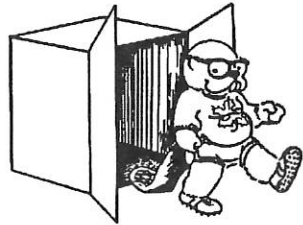
The workbooks are based on Mrs. Mann's work in teaching reading in the classroom. There is space for the children's own pictures and words about their families, their friends, and their pets. The symbols help the children to understand and remember the words; often the symbol is learned first. At the end of each book is a mini-dictionary for reviewing the words and symbols used in the series. This is helpful to the children when they begin to write their own stories. The meaning of the symbols is explained and there are suggestions for the teacher.

The two workbook pages shown here are from a basic workbook entitled *Where Are You?* (Mann & Mann, 1979), which explores *position* as expressed in words and symbols: inside, outside; in front of, behind; under, over. The logic of these symbols is beautiful to see. The author suggests that the children play games as they move blocks, small figures or animals into different positions around a box or other container, at the same time saying the words and indicating symbols.

inside the box



outside of the box



In addition to workbooks, there are several reading books with both words and symbols, and a Blissymbol coloring book, all produced by dedicated teachers.

It is significant that Mrs. Mann found Blissymbols helpful to autistic children. She found that using the symbols for communication may make the interaction between these children and the teacher less threatening to them. A child can focus on the symbol as a neutral object that does not require eye contact with the teacher. Also, because the symbols are there for the child to choose from, it is easier for him to use them to express

himself, just as some students find it easier to choose an answer on a multiple choice test than to think of it themselves.

Some teachers and parents have asked if children who first learn to communicate with symbols will want to tackle the harder task of learning to read printed words. This problem seems unlikely; it has not happened so far. After all, communication in the world of today still depends heavily on the printed word. No child wants to be left out of this.

What are the implications of this for teaching reading to children without handicaps? The possibilities are intriguing. Using Blissymbolics as a transition to learning to read words is not farfetched. The letters of the alphabet on a printed page may look completely incomprehensible to a young child. If he has had the experience of learning symbols, easy for him to understand, he may be less bewildered by the words in his reader. Some of the words may already be familiar to him; he would have seen them, over and over again, printed above the symbols. This transition could be as helpful to children with minor learning difficulties as it was to Gwen Mann's "special" children.

New ideas take root slowly, but some do prevail. Perhaps someday Blissymbolics will be widely accepted as a transition to learning to read.

goodbye



Author's Notes

Throughout this article I have used the pronouns *he*, *him*, *his* to indicate both sexes, thus avoiding the awkwardness of saying *he and she* and so on.

Blissymbolics used herein derived from the symbols described in the work, *Semantography*, original copyright © C.K. Bliss, 1949. Blissymbolics Communication International, a division of The Easter Seal Communication Institute, Exclusive licensee 1982.

Further information about Blissymbolics may be obtained from Blissymbolics Communication International, a division of The Easter Seal Communication Institute, 250 Ferrand Drive, Don Mills, Ontario, Canada M3C 3G8.

References

- Helfman, E. S. (1981). *Blissymbolics: Speaking without speech*. New York: Lodestar/Dutton Books.
- Helfman, E. S. (1967). *Signs and symbols around the world*. New York: Lothrop, Lee & Shepard.
- Mann, A., & Mann, G. (1979). *Where are you?* (Workbook, first of series.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press.