

To switch or not to switch? The pros and cons of speech generating devices

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Speech Generating Devices

Many people think that speech generating devices are better than low technology boards. Ideally they should be better, and you should be able to go anywhere and do anything with them. But they don't always fulfil your dreams for a whole range of reasons.

I would like to share my experiences of using speech generating devices with you so I can tell you some of the pitfalls I have had to face. So you can understand why I don't always use my electronic system but why it has a definite place in my life.

Starting with scanning



Over the years I have had a number of devices. The first device was an Epson SpeechPac with scan overlay which I got when I was eight. I accessed it using a head switch and experienced for the first time how impatient people get when I use scanning for communication. This has always flustered me and made it hard for me to communicate. I can't put the thoughts together and express myself properly. I know people don't mean to be like this, but the body language and the wandering eyes make the message so very clear. The only thing worse than this was when I was nine and some bright occupational therapist decided I should use my hand.



















Laptops and EZ Keys



When I was 12 I got my first laptop with EZ Keys. A speaker was added so people could hear me. I got another laptop when I was in my mid teens, also with EZ keys. And another laptop with EZ Keys when I was 18 and – wait, there's more – yet another when I was 20.


EZ Keys was not the problem – I love EZ Keys. I have a non-speaking version I use to complete my studies and my computer aided design. I can design a whole house on my computer using EZ Keys. I can control everything down to the smallest detail.

Low Technology

 cold	 cold meat	 cow
 crayon	 cricketer	 crocodile
 cry	 cubby	 dad
 dance	 dessert	 dinner
 dinosaur	 dog	 doll
 don't walk	 dragon	 eggs

Over the years, I have also had a range of low technology options. From the time I was a little kid, I had a communication book where words were grouped in categories – lots of nouns (e.g. foods), verbs, pronouns, etc. and an alphabet page.

I also had a board which had grouped words on it. By the time I was twelve I was mostly using the alphabet page in my book. When I was in my mid teens I got an ETRAN and that quickly became my main form of communication thanks to my wonderful speechie at the time Kim Magee.

A	H	U	R	D	C	N
3	W	1	F	2	G	
P	8				X	M
E						T
9	V				6	Q
J	Z	Y	\$	K	L	
S	5	7	I	B	4	O

The Good, The Bad and the Brown Epson

The good thing about the Epson was that I could say what I wanted to, when I wanted to and how I wanted to. Unfortunately, the bad points outweighed the good.

It was mounted badly, simply stuck on my wheelchair tray. This meant it obscured my vision while I was driving, I had difficulty seeing the screen (especially outside) and it wasn't very secure, which was probably why it spent more time in the USA than Australia. I have athetoid cerebral palsy which means things need to be bolted down or they have the propensity to become a missile.

On top of that, the brown retro case might be funky now but it certainly wasn't funky then. Stack this up against my alphabet page in my book which never broke and was always with me (unless Dad forgot it) and was way faster and you start to understand my lack of use of the Epson. For me, the Epson had absolutely no advantage over my book. Mostly, I just played around with it. I was too young to take it seriously and when I was at home my Dad knew what I wanted to say.

The Laptops

I loved having the laptops – I wouldn't have got my school work done without them. However, I didn't really use them as a communication system at all. There were so many difficulties with the laptop based systems. The laptops were a great idea but in reality they didn't work. I believe this is because they aren't designed specifically for the job. Having said that, I know that some people use them very well – they're just not for me.

They were very difficult to mount, despite hours with engineers, OTs and Speechies. They still interfered with my driving, were vulnerable to theft and attendant care staff frequently complained about them as they increased transfer time from my chair dramatically. Due to my age and poor self-esteem this had a big impact on my use of the systems.

In addition, there was poor volume (laptops are designed to be heard by the user, not by everyone else), poor battery life (even with the later ones where an adaptor was put from the wheelchair battery), they required a level of computer skills from my support staff in the early years which they didn't have, they were much slower than my Etran and, most of all, they were incredibly fragile. We tried to overcome every difficulty that we faced but there always seemed to be something else.

And I have to say that while I had my faithful ETRAN which gave me speed and reliability I didn't always try that hard. The agenda to use the laptops always seemed to be set by my therapists, who felt I needed them, rather than by me. I was quite happy with man's best friend – a Perspex board with letters on it. Who needs technology?

I'd also like to point out that for many years I hardly used my laptop system, but despite this I still managed to go through five different laptops. A psychologist might say something about this representing how much I valued them.

Independence



People always say that a device will give me independence. But, my communication is never truly independent. I either rely on someone holding up my ETRAN and spelling out what I'm saying or else I rely on them to set up my device. I have more success with the ETRAN.

I live in a residential unit where I am assisted by staff to get ready each day. Although many of the staff complain, continually, about the ETRAN and how much extra time it takes, very few of them are prepared to spend the extra time in the morning to set up my device. So much easier to shove the ETRAN in the back pocket of my chair.

Since, generally, the ETRAN is my preferred method of communication this doesn't bother me most days, but when I have a meeting to go to, am catching up with friends or just on the pull this can be annoying. It has never made sense to me. If they don't like the ETRAN why don't they just put my device on? It's a Catch 22. It's almost like it would be easier for them if I didn't communicate at all.

My current speech generating device



A couple of years ago in preparation for my tertiary education, I decided I needed to look at communication devices again. Maybe I had matured, but I finally realized there was a place for them in my life. I realized it was important for me to have a way to communicate that everybody could understand. So I tracked down an old speechie that I trusted – well not really. She was just the only one who would put up with me any longer.

I tried the Dynawrite and some other devices, and chose the Dynawrite for many reasons. These included having good word prediction, great options with scanning including predictive text and environmental control. I also really liked the way it looked. (Jane, my speechie, made me put all that in. She likes to think it was an informed decision.)

I have to be honest, I don't use the Dynawrite much. Even now, when it is me that wants a device. It is bizarre when I know how it would benefit me in so many ways but I always prefer the ETRAN. The ETRAN is so much more personal and much quicker.

Jane keeps telling me if I practiced more with the Dynawrite I'd be quicker with that too, but I see the Dynawrite as having a small group of specific situations in my life for which it is useful. If I'm doing a reading at church, if I have to give a talk at Uni or if I'm at a pub where the barman just can't understand me.

Finishing Up



I sound like I've been very negative about communication devices. Well, I am. I am sure that they have a place – there are times when I would be stuck without it. I think that often speechies feel that I should be using it all day but what I have tried to do is explain all the reasons why I don't want to.

This is my choice.

I simply ask that you respect my choice, and don't feel bad when I don't use my communication device. It doesn't reflect on you, it reflects my personality and my life. And next time you have a client who only uses a device sometimes, think beyond the device – there could be a much stronger reason why.