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Bercon moves 'Fast ForWord' in reading skills

Q & A

IN the never-ending quest to improve educational practice, professional educators look to qualitative advances in computerisation to help produce measurable improvement in performance – a tectonic shift which will move the educational process to a higher level.

The educators at Bercon Consulting in Southampton believe they have introduced such a product to Bermuda. "Fast ForWord" is the literal "brainchild" of Michael Merzenich, a neuroscientist at the University of California, and co-founder of San Francisco-based Scientific Learning, a company that developed software which Time magazine described as "a powerful video-game program to aid children who cannot process the sounds of language fast enough to comprehend normal speech", and "a promising application of recent and remarkable discoveries about the power of the brain to learn new tricks".

Scientists have discovered that the brain is "plastic", not rigidly fixed like a computer chip, and can re-wire itself throughout life with the help of vigorous training.

Dr. Merzenich told Time that we are "a product of learning progressions in the brain". In developing his ground-breaking educational tool, he is extending an effort to help people "use intensive training to remediate the impairments of mankind."

Angela Fubler, CEO and principal consultant of Bercon, and her colleagues, maths tutor Richard Bassett and educational therapist Carol McDowall, learned that the results of the Fast ForWord approach have been documented in one of the largest databases of results in education, and they have begun to use it in a special programme for children at their Church Road educational consultancy.

They believe it can be beneficial for children of all abilities, not just those with learning



Bercon Ltd's "Fast ForWord" team: Maths tutor and programme manager Richard Bassett and educational therapist Carol McDowall

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difficulties, and they talked about it with reporter COLIN O'CONNOR and photographer GLENN TUCKER.

Q: Angela, can you tell me when you first became aware of Fast ForWord?

AF: I just stumbled across a reference to it, and had no idea what it was at the time. But it leapt off the page and looked really interesting. I read about it in a pre-school paper, and it sounded like a computer programme that would be beneficial for inclusion in our pre-school, but the more I looked at it, the less it looked like something which would connect with pre-school, and the more my interest increased.

I made some inquiries, and did some independent research, and was just astounded at the results that had been reported as they related to neuroscience and brain plasticity. The product actually re-trains the brain to learn, and because of my background in education and working primarily with children who have behaviour disorders and learning disabilities, I saw it as a way to fill some of the gaps that I saw in children's abilities to learn.

We teach them skills to compensate for learning differences, but this programme actually gets to the root of what is causing some of those problems in the child's brain. It re-trains it, and simultaneously inputs the knowledge that that part of the brain is missing. It allows the child to learn other academic concepts in a much better and faster way.

Q: What part do Richard and Carol play in the Fast ForWord programme?

AF: Just over two years ago, Richard joined us as a part-time maths tutor, and his background was just right. When I came across Fast ForWord, I thought his experience would make him the perfect person to head up the programme, and after I signed the contract with Scientific Learning, I talked to him about it, and he was very willing to take it on.

Carol has been with me since the beginning of Bercon five years ago, as a friend and as an educational therapist, and has a natural gift for working with children and families. The combination, as it relates to Bercon and Fast ForWord, has been a real asset.

Q: Richard, can you tell me something about your educational background, and how you came to join Bercon?

RB: My background is actually in electrical engineering, which has a major math component, and that made it easy to get into math tutoring. At university, I did some tutoring, and was a research lab instructor for young adults for a while. So, working with the kids at Bercon as a math tutor was a natural fit.

Going back, I was at Warwick Academy, then Bermuda College, for a diploma in arts and science, then I went to the University of New Brunswick, where I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in electrical engineering in 1985 and 1988. I came back home and worked for Cable & Wireless for ten years, mainly in marketing. I left there to pursue some personal projects, and I thought that the math tutoring would be an interesting and rewarding addition to my other projects.

Q: It may be something of a digression, and none of my business, but what other

projects are you pursuing?

RB: (Laughs) OK, here goes. Well, I am a songwriter and music publisher, which I pursue part-time, in addition to my roles here at Bercon. (The modest Mr. Bassett had not wanted to raise the topic of a recent profile in *The Royal Gazette* on his song-writing career.)

Q: Can you tell me your first impression of the Fast ForWord programme, and the effect you thought it could have?

RB: As Angela was investigating the programme, I was tutoring some children with learning disabilities. I was achieving a good level of success with some of them, but I realised, when I understood the nature of the Fast ForWord programme, that it could be of real benefit to many of them, and improve upon some of the results that I got. It addresses some fundamentals, in terms of cognitive skills and brain development, which applies not just to math but to all learning.

Q: Could you summarise the benefits of the programme, compared to other learning programmes or strategies for young children?

RB: Fast ForWord doesn't replace existing programmes in schools, but in its approach to developing the brain and cognitive skills, it will improve the results of other programmes. It helps to develop the part of the brain which is responsible for processing memory retention, and in so doing, it helps with language and reading and other activities kids would be involved in at school.

Q: How long has this programme been under way at Bercon, or is it still very new?

RB: It is still very new for us, but there are close to a half-million kids who have been using Fast ForWord in the US, and more around the world, for a number of years, and it is based on over 30 years of brain research.

Q: Does it benefit all children, or is it intended mainly for children with some learning disability?

RB: We are putting children through a screening process, encouraging students, with their parents, to have an assessment done as a first step. That helps identify any particular learning disability the children may have, and based on that and other information, we can determine how effective Fast ForWord will be for that child.

AF: Because of the kind of programme that it is, it can help all children; even, they report, relatively gifted children, and even adults, people in general. It has also been found to help seniors strengthen their memory function, and give them the fun of using a computer. However, with children, these programmes tend to be geared towards children who are struggling.

Q: How many children are already working in the Fast ForWord programme?

RB: We are in the process of registering ten private clients who will be using the programme from home, and we are following the progress of one child who has been using it for a few weeks, and we are able to monitor his progress on-line, using a service called Progress Tracker developed by Scientific Learning. It enables us to see how he is progressing in different areas as he uses the software daily.

We will be familiarising parents or guardians with the software, so they can supervise the children. As we monitor online, we will intervene if necessary, and highlight any problems which may arise.

So, children can use the programme from home if they or their parents prefer, and we will be also be bringing one or two labs online in the next two or three months, where kids will be able to use it in a computer lab, if the parents and children prefer that setting.

Q: Carol, can you tell me about your background and involvement with Bercon and Fast ForWord?

CM: I also attended Warwick Academy and Bermuda College, went to a liberal arts school in Kentucky for a year, and then to Mount St. Vincent in Canada for two years, where I graduated with a bachelor's degree in sociology and anthropology. I worked in a nursery school, and then in a Government school for three years, and started my family, but I have been with Bercon for five years.

Q: Can you explain your role at Bercon, and how you expect Fast ForWord to help?

CM: I have mostly worked here as an educational therapist, supporting students in the classroom, and have recently been using music to work with children in our Chatterbox PreSchool.

I have been amazed by what I've learned about the effect the programme has been shown to have on children's brains, how it can re-wire and re-train itself, and that really sparked my interest. Also, because of my observation of one of my own grandparents, I will be looking into more research about how this programme can help seniors.

Q: Angela, are you aware of any move to incorporate this programme widely in Bermuda?

AF: There is an educator already trained on Fast ForWord in Canada who works for Government, and offered the programme last year to a number of children in a lab site. But as an example of how useful it has proved for children of all ages and abilities, the school district of Philadelphia has about 276 schools, and after doing an independent pilot study, in September 2003 they bought licences to use the programme in 265 schools in the district. That's how impressed they were with it.

Also, the results that the programme has achieved using the Terra Nova tests, as we use here in Government schools, have been remarkable. The programme has been proved to have a very positive impact on the brain in those very areas that are tested by the Terra Nova tests.

Would I recommend it for all schools in Bermuda? Yes, I would love for all kids to be exposed to Fast ForWord, because I know and I see how many children struggle. Bercon is the exclusive provider for Fast ForWord in Bermuda, and we can provide the training for, say, speech pathologists or clinicians, and Government or independent schools can buy licences.

We have the ability to train individuals from any organisation or school which believes it can benefit from the programme. The success of programmes such as this comes down to

management and implementation, and we now have experience of piloting children through what is an extremely intensive programme.

Q: So you think that this is sufficiently different and important that it can have a meaningful effect on education in Bermuda?

AF: If the right students are identified, and it is understood it is not a panacea, then absolutely. Let me mention also, that we are going to be having a summer programme beginning June 20, and the week of June 4, we are going to be bringing down one of the directors of Scientific Learning, Sherelle Walker, who is their chief education officer. We hope to be able to work with 30 children, and we hope they are signed up early so that they can have the benefit of the knowledge and experience of Ms Walker. We think that this programme can be really positive for the educational process in Bermuda. *Interested parties should contact Bercon at 236-7190.*

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