Communication and Deafness

The invisible disability

Deafness has been referred to as 'the invisible disability' - d/Deaf people are not easily identified as disabled, showing no outward signs that they are any different. For them, communication, not access or mobility, is the key issue. This is most significant in the case of d/Deaf users of British Sign Language (or any other national sign language), for whom both spoken and written language present formidable barriers.

What is British Sign Language (BSL)?

BSL is the first or preferred language of more than 70,000 Deaf people in the United Kingdom. Like sign languages used in other parts of the world, it is a full and complete language in its own right, with its own grammar, vocabulary and syntax, and is totally separate from English. It is:

- *not* a way of expressing English with gestures
- *not* an 'aid' created to 'help' Deaf people communicate
- *Not* inferior to or less expressive than spoken language.

BSL has been in use amongst the British Deaf community over generations, developing like any other language. It has, however, been under constant attack by those who see it as inferior and would eradicate it. For 100 years, from 1880 to 1980, it was banned in Deaf Schools in the UK and replaced by 'oralism', with pupils forced to speak and lip-read English, which most could neither hear nor understand. Consequently, most profoundly deaf children learned very little of anything.

The status of BSL rose after a damning report on the failure of oralism (Conrad, 1979), with international recognition of the linguistic value of sign languages, and evidence that deaf children learn more effectively through sign language. 95 per cent of deaf children in the UK are now taught in ordinary schools rather than in specialist d/Deaf schools; however, problems of access still arise through:

- the shortage of educational BSL interpreters and communicators
- the ongoing conflict over appropriate methodology: oralism v sign language
- Ignorance of the communication needs of d/Deaf children.

Consequently, although more young d/Deaf adults now gain university entrance qualifications, many have experienced restricted educational support, and may have difficulties with literacy in their second language, English.
Students from other countries who use sign language will be unable to communicate with BSL users since all sign languages are languages in their own right and differ in the same way that other languages do.

Why do some d/Deaf students use English (or Sign-Supported English [SSE]), and others use BSL?

The younger a student became deaf, the less likely s/he is to use English. Those born deaf have never heard the spoken word: theirs is a visual world, with visual communication. They cannot relate easily to spoken English, and consequently struggle to understand written English.

Those who lost their hearing after they learned to speak (and possibly to read and write) will have less difficulty with English, as it is their first language. They may use Sign Supported English as an aid to communication. SSE is not a language - it is spoken English supported by signs borrowed from BSL.

What is Deaf Culture?

Deaf Culture cannot easily be defined.

- It is a way of life enjoyed by Britain's Deaf community, centred upon visuality and shared experience of Deaf-ness.
- It has its own traditions, humour, folklore and art-forms, including wonderfully expressive poetry.
- At its hub is the rich language, BSL.

Deaf Etiquette and Hints for Effective Communication

What's in a name?

When referring to students with hearing loss, staff should be aware of certain issues:

- Many deaf people - and almost all Deaf people - dislike the term 'hearing-impaired'. It has negative connotations, and focuses on a perceived deficit. Deaf people do not regard themselves as hearing-impaired.
- The expression 'The Deaf' is also disliked - say 'Deaf People'.
- 'Hard of Hearing' refers to people with slight or moderate hearing loss - d/Deaf people do not find this term appropriate.
In order to encompass all levels of deafness the terms d/Deaf or hearing-impaired people can be used. This will ensure that all groups are covered.

**How can I communicate more effectively?**

When you are communicating with d/Deaf students, whether in the classroom, one-to-one or in the field, remember:

**For students who lip-read**

- Make sure you are not standing in front of a window or light: no-one can lip-read a silhouette.
- Ensure there is adequate light so the student can see your face.
- The student needs to be able to see your mouth: don't cover it with scarves, whiskers, hands or food.
- Face the student and maintain eye-contact: don't turn away to point at anything when speaking.
- Speak normally - don't exaggerate lip movements or slow down unnaturally; don't gabble; don't *shout*.
- Stick to the point - don't start to talk about one thing then wander off onto another subject: context is an important clue in lip-reading.
- Keep at a distance of between 1 and 2 metres for one-to-one communication.
- Don't expect d/Deaf students to lip-read at a distance, in group-work or in large lectures.
- Only one person at a time can be lip-read - control group discussions so that people speak in sequence. It is useful if people raise their hands before they speak in discussions. The d/Deaf or hearing impaired person can then turn to look at the speaker, rather than trying to locate the sound and then losing the first part of the speaker's comment.

**For students who use an interpreter**

- When working with a Sign Language Interpreter many of the above points also apply - the student must be able to see your face, the interpreter can only interpret one person at a time, and so on.
- Use a registered qualified Sign Language Interpreter or a registered trainee - relying on the student's pals just will not do.
- Ensure the student can see the interpreter and any visual aids.
- Ensure the interpreter can hear you speak.
- While you are speaking, the student will look at the interpreter; however, if the student is signing and the interpreter is 'voicing' his/her comments, do *not* look at the interpreter - look at the student. S/he is the one who is commenting.
• When speaking to the student, don’t speak to the interpreter: look at the student and address your comments to him/her.

• Never say to the interpreter "Tell him..." Always speak directly to the student.

• Remember that the interpreter can only interpret one person at a time: control group discussions so that people speak in sequence.

• Remember that there is a few seconds lag or delay in interpreting - allow time to catch up.

• Don’t ask the interpreter to comment or participate in discussions - s/he is there to facilitate communication between you and the student/s. S/he will not communicate with you other than to clarify meaning.

For all d/Deaf or hearing-impaired students

• Please understand that it is impossible to watch an interpreter or lip-read and take notes/read handouts at the same time. Where possible students should be provided with overhead transparencies and handouts in advance, either from a Web-site or in hard copy. Interpreters should be briefed in advance of what will be required.

• Relax and be natural with d/Deaf or hearing-impaired students.

d/Deaf Students Choosing and Embarking on Courses

Selecting courses which involve fieldwork

The most successful students are arguably the ones who start by making wise and well-informed choices amongst potential courses. It is even more important for students with additional needs, such as d/Deafness, to make the best choice from amongst the array they are offered so that difficulties at a later stage are minimised. In order to make these choices students will need:

• Opportunities to discuss potential need with tutors before signing up to foresee any needs well in advance and plan for them.

• Clear details of the desired learning outcomes, teaching and assessment methods and activities they are likely to encounter on a course, and full details of the fieldwork arrangements particularly where these relate to communication. They will also need to know something about the learning environment (e.g. noisy lecture theatres located on busy main roads) and facilities that will support their disability.
Different routes to this information: textual in handbooks and on Web sites; visual, diagrammatic and photographic. Clarity of language is paramount since Deaf users of BSL have English as their second language. In designing information presentation it might be helpful to test that your use of language is accessible to a non-native speaker of English of reasonable linguistic competence.

Access to advice: in person with staff; to Frequently Asked Questions sections of Web pages; to students who have done the course before; to reports of fieldwork activities; and to photographic records.

Information to be consistent between departmental and institutional material and between various support units.

Assurance that a degree of flexibility is built into the design of fieldwork - alternative approaches negotiated by groups of students, for example.

Course induction

Institutions and individual academics make many assumptions about student knowledge and experience. However, there is plenty of evidence that students are not at ease with the conventions of higher education and spend some considerable time learning about the culture, language and norms of their environment. This will be particularly true of students who come from backgrounds where going to university is not the norm. What exactly is a lecture supposed to achieve? What should I be doing in a lecture? What are the expectations of me in a seminar group? And, of course, 'What does fieldwork at university entail?'

For d/Deaf students it is much more difficult to pick up the clues and cues as they go along, since little is made explicit and a lot is picked up by overheard remarks, chance comments and so on - precisely the kind of thing that d/Deaf students have difficulty with. It therefore becomes the responsibility of the lecturer to find ways of helping d/Deaf students have access to this information.

A fieldwork handbook will help - with some basic rules and principles of fieldwork, descriptions of the range of fieldwork that they might encounter. It could also provide pictorial records of previous field work and some informal reports of previous students' experience. As well as the explicit discipline-related goals of the fieldwork an explanation could be given of the ancillary learning which the experience will bring: understanding working in groups, appreciating difference and variety of contributions, and concern for others.