Supporting the Learning of Deaf students in Higher Education: a case study at Sheffield Hallam University

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ABSTRACT: *This article is an examination of the issues surrounding support for the learning of deaf students in higher education (HE). There are an increasing number of deaf students attending HE institutes, and as such provision of support mechanisms for these students is not only necessary but essential. Deaf students are similar to their hearing peers, in that they will approach their learning and require differing levels of support dependant upon the individual. They will, however, require a different kind of support, which can be technical or human resource based. This article examines the issues that surround supporting deaf students in HE with use of a case study of provision at Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), during the academic year 1994-95. It is evident that by considering the needs of deaf students and making changes to our teaching practices that all students can benefit.*

Introduction

Gallaudet University, in the US, established in 1864, is the only university in the world specifically for deaf students. There are no higher education (HE) institutions in the UK that cater specifically for deaf students, as a result of the fact deaf students are accommodated within institutions where courses are designed specifically for hearing students. They are, in effect, mainstreamed. It could be argued that deaf students usually start out on a less than level 'playing field', as compared to their hearing peers.

A survey in 1989 (Daniels & Corlett, 1990) established that a disproportionately low number of deaf students participated in HE. It was argued that this could be attributable to the poor provision for deaf students in the various institutions surveyed amongst other issues. Of the institutions surveyed only four responded that they had a policy for deaf students, Sheffield Hallam University (SHU) was one of them (Corlett, 1991).

A more recent survey (Olohan, 1995) found improvements in the provision made for deaf students in HE institutions with some universities now offering a much more comprehensive range of support services. Whilst another study (Luker, 1995) found that awareness amongst staff who work with deaf students, in general, is still poor. Olohan's survey highlights the increasing number of deaf students attending university, for example estimated numbers in 1990-91 were 751 and in 1993-94 were 1154. Reasons for this increase are attributed, in the main, to: the improvement of the Disabled Students Allowance (DSA) in 1990; the expansion of services for deaf students in further education (FE) colleges; the general increase in numbers of deaf students wishing to go on to HE; and the development of services and provisions in HE (Olohan, 1995). Richardson (1995) suggests that the increase could be due to the general increase in student numbers across the whole spectrum of HE.

The aim of this paper is to examine processes of supporting the learning of deaf students in HE, with specific reference to my own teaching experiences at SHU.

In order to do this it will be necessary to provide adequate working definitions of the terms used in this area. Furthermore it will be important to identify exactly what resources/support deaf students expect to have access to.

Definitions

Deaf

There are many definitions of the term 'deaf'. It can be used to refer to the whole range of hearing impairments (Royal National Institute for the Deaf (RNID), 1993). Hence, for this paper, usage of 'deaf' will be made to refer to all students with a type of deafness. It must be noted that the needs of deaf students will vary according to their preferred method of communication and the degree of their deafness (RNID, 1993). A student who is deaf will probably have very different needs from a student who is hearing impaired. A variety of communication methods are utilized by deaf students, such as speech, lip-reading, amplified residual hearing, and for those who have little or no hearing, sign language or support for lip-reading may be their first language (RNID, 1993). For medical definitions of deafness and hard of hearing see Olohan (1995), Jones (1993) and RNID (1993).

Learning

Learning as a process whereby students attain skills, knowledge and understanding seems to be the common thread throughout the literature, as does the notion that students have differing approaches to and understanding of learning. Marton and Säljö (1976) suggest two common approaches: *surface*, where the student seeks to memorise facts and regurgitate when required; and *deep,* where the student attempts to make sense of what is being learnt. Entwistle and Ramsden (1983) concur with this view and suggest a third as being *strategic*, where the student is motivated by achievement and works in a competitive manner. A deep approach could be considered the most appropriate. Gibbs (1992) suggests that a surface approach is all too common but that appropriate course design, teaching methods and assessment can foster a deep approach.

So how does this relate to supporting the learning of deaf students? Clearly we should be supporting *all* students to be deep learners, if we accept the above arguments, so in theory deaf students should be no different. However, the way in which we need to encourage and support this approach for deaf students may be different to their hearing peers.

Support

Some criticize the use of the term 'support' when referring to services provided for deaf (or indeed disabled) students, Saur (1992) believes that words such as 'support':

> . . . foster a view of Deaf students as passive and dependent, receiving what they need from protective, all-knowing support providers. (p.97)

Saur (1992) is of the opinion that the term 'resources' should be used, as this implies that students *use* resources, and are not *provided* with support. As an institution and as lecturers we can provide resources for students and offer support which students might take advantage of. Perhaps the essential point is that all students need support in some form or another. Deaf students are no different, they require the same support as their hearing peers, but delivered in a

specialized way. Sheffield Hallam University's Disability Development Project use the Seven Needs for Independent Living' [1] to structure their support for disabled students. The 'Needs' being a set of principles that should enable genuine independence for disabled students.

Support is an intrinsic element of provision in education. Varying levels of provision are required. For example, every student should be entitled to information about admissions, but not every student would require an interpreter for a group tutorial, (bearing in mind that not every deaf student would require an interpreter). Clearly there are occasions when support can be defined for students as a whole (institutionally), for groups of students (at course level) and for individual students.

It is often the case that support is viewed as everything 'outside' of the classroom, such as pastoral care, counselling services, recreation, and so on. However, it can be argued that teaching is an essential element of provision, and is most certainly the key element of supporting an appropriate approach to learning. Earwaker (1992) suggests:

> A good and challenging higher education experience necessarily involves an element of careful management of that experience by the teacher, who arranges the challenges . . . all of which is designed to facilitate the student's exploration and learning. (p. 126).

So if we accept that students can obtain a greater degree of the support they require to complete their degree from the actual course they study on, then we should focus upon how we as teachers/lecturers can support students at that level, and encourage students to foster a deep approach to learning.

Care must be taken not to categorize and assume all deaf students require exactly the same kind/amount of support for learning. We know this is the case for their hearing peers. However, the paradox is that if we do not categorize deaf students resource allocation may be problematic, for example there is a need to categorize

TABLE 1 Human resources available to deaf students

- Interpreters—translate what the lecturer or others say into British Sign Language or Sign Supported *English* (and vice versa).
- Communication support workers—provide an interpreting service, and may also provide a lipspeaking or notetaking service and a voice over for the student's contributions.
- Notetakers—as it is impossible for a student to lipread a speaker or follow an interpreter **and** take notes, a notetaker is imperative. The student will then have a permanent record of the lecture.
- Lipspeakers—useful to those who do not use sign language and find the lecturer difficult to lipread. A speaker will repeat the words of the speaker without voice and may change certain words if they are difficult to lipread.
- Teachers of the deaf—support the student outside of teaching hours. They can give tuition in some of the new vocabulary or concepts arising from the course.

Sources: Olohan (1995) and RNID (1992)

them as disabled for the DSA. It may be that we need to view the support of deaf students on two extreme levels, those of institution and the individual lecturer. It is at these levels that this paper aims to focus.

Support/Resources for Deaf Students in HE Institutions

> The support needs of Deaf students in Higher Education will vary according to their degree of deafness, their preferred method of communication and their experiences in education prior to university, (Olohan, 1995, p. 8)

As this statement suggests there are differing forms of support for deaf students. They fall into two categories, human and technical resources see (Tables I and II). Not all deaf students require all of these services, their needs will be very much dependent on their preferred method of communication, and possibly their degree of deafness. Often students arrive at university not knowing what support is available to them, or how to access it. A good admissions process (including appropriate literature, interviews, informal visits, assessment of support requirements, and so on) and central support service, such as a co-ordinator for disabled student, are vital to enable students to make decisions (RNID, 1991).

Case Study—SHU

The following case study illustrates some issues which surround supporting deaf students in HE. The aim is to identify how SHU provided resources/support for its disabled students and specifically deaf students during the academic year 1994-95, highlighting any issues or areas for discussion. In addition, a case study of my experience of teaching and supporting a deaf student that year, provides some valuable discussion points. It should be stressed that whilst the focus of the case study and discussion will be based upon deaf students, SHU also has a record for good practice with regard to all disabled students.

TABLE II Technical resources available to deaf students

- Induction loops—students using hearing aids can benefit from these. If an induction loop is fitted around the parameter of a room the student can set the hearing aid to it's 'T' position and pick up the sound. There are other similar systems such as *infra-red* aids and *radio aids*.
- Audio-visual aids—such as plug-in TV listening aids, subtitles, teletext and OHPs.
- Notetaking technology—hardware and software exists which allows speech to be phonetically recorded. Also a notetaker may be able to use a laptop during a lecturer to record notes, and the student would be able to read this at the same time.
- Alarms/alerting devices—generally flashing or vibrating.

Sources: Olohan (1995) and RNID (1992)

Disabled Students at SHU

The university was successful in a bid to the HEFCE [2] initiative to widen access for disabled students and has been able to establish a Disability Development Project (DDP). This project was run initially for 12 months and aimed to review the existing provision of both academic and non-academic support to disabled students and to develop a formalized framework which would embed good practice. In completing this aim the project has been successful with the publication of a final report of the findings (SHU, 1994). Most importantly, useful frameworks have been put in place which have allowed for improved provision, such as a strategic admissions procedure. This has almost certainly been of benefit to all disabled students.

Deaf Students at SHU

The 1994-95 academic year saw 42 deaf/hearing impaired students enrolled at SHU [3] Olohan (1995) suggests that in 1993 there were only six institutions that had over 21 deaf students enrolled. This implies that SHU attracts a high proportion of the deaf students attending HE institutes within the UK. This suggests a good reputation for support and delivery of services, in fact Olohan (1995) uses SHU as a profile of good practice, along with only eight other institutions.

Any deaf student applying to the university is identified from the UCAS form and the DDP can invite that student for an informal interview, during which the student's support needs can be discussed, and a proforma completed detailing specific requirements.

Once a disabled student arrives at SHU an induction programme allows clarification of the support they require and a learning contract is agreed. All arrangements for hearing impaired students are made through the Education Adviser (Disability), who provides support for all disabled students (see Table III). The support for deaf and hearing impaired students is contracted to the Sheffield College Hearing Impaired Support Service (HISS). Sheffield College is the largest FE establishment in Europe (Miller, 1995). HISS was established as a result of the need to provide appropriate support to deaf students on an increasingly wide ranging number of courses at Sheffield College.

TABLE III. Support provided by Education Advisor (Disability), Disability Development Project, Sheffield Hallam University.

- An early induction event for deaf, disabled and dyslexic students.
- Help to identify equipment and personal support that might be needed.
- Help to claim Disabled Students Allowance (DSA).
- The offer of a package of support for year one and subsequent years.
- The writing of a learning contract that sets out the requirements a student has for successful study.
- Help to negotiate alternative assessment where necessary.
- Negotiation with teaching staff to ensure al support is in place.
- Notify staff in other services, e. g. library, accommodation of needs of individual students.
- Training for staff on disability issues.

HISS attempt to offer support to students according to their individual needs. A basic package of support is offered at three different levels. The package can include weekly tutorials with a teacher of the deaf, awareness sessions for staff and fellow students about the needs of the deaf students, information and advice on technical resources, general support for progress through course (e.g. special arrangements for examination times, liaison for placements, etc), and most importantly arrangement of the services of lipspeakers, communication support workers, interpreters or notetakers. Students agree an appropriate support package with HISS and the Education Advisor. They are allocated to a teacher of the deaf, who will monitor their progress and arrange tutorials as required. Finally, an application for DSA to fund the support is made.

My Experience of Supporting the Learning of Deaf Students at SHU

Prior to working at SHU I was employed at another HE Institute, where I became very involved with improving access for disabled students. I attended numerous training courses (e.g. British Sign Language (BSL) Stage 1) and sat on a university-wide working group aimed at improving access. When, however I was faced with teaching a deaf student IT and Study Skills on my first day of teaching (ever) I was somewhat overawed. I hadn't been told I'd be teaching a deaf student, and to make matters worse the student arrived very late (after the notetaker had left, in fact). The student was a BSL user and did not often use lipreading, hence communication was an initial issue.

I suddenly had to rethink my teaching methods for the whole unit. In IT I couldn't stand at the front of the class and give instructions verbally, because the deaf student would have his or her back to me, hence would not be able to lipread, see an interpreter and the notetaker would have to write very quickly to keep up with step-by-step instructions. As for study skills I assumed a deaf student would need very different support to hearing student.

In an attempt to resolve the teaching methods problem I decided that I had to produce detailed handouts with step-by-step instructions, explanations, and useful tips for the IT sessions. The study skills tutorials were a different story. I had problems with teaching methods appropriate to all students in this area. The materials I had to use were very counter-productive, and focused very much on product rather than process thus encouraging surface and strategic approaches to learning rather than deep. The deaf student frequently questioned the validity of the unit, and I can understand why. The student was probably obtaining better skills support for learning from the Teacher of the deaf at HISS.

In addition to the teaching methods issue, I found that I was also the student's personal tutor and year tutor. Communication with the student was reasonable, as I knew a little sign and hand written notes covered what my signing couldn't. However the student rarely came to me for support in any form. I certainly felt divorced from the other support services they were accessing. In fact I knew very little about them until I started researching this paper. Had I known that the student saw a Teacher of the deaf for something similar to skills support for learning I could have liaised and discussed appropriate approaches for my teaching.

Discussion of Issues

A number of issues can be drawn out of the case study and discussed, which may have applications to other HE institutions.

Method of Provision – to contract out or not?

SHU contract out the support service or deaf students to HISS at Sheffield College. Olohan (1995) suggests there are advantages and disadvantages to both sides of this argument, on the side of contracting out is that the institution can take advantage of such a good service as Sheffield College's. However, SHU then becomes an agency for agonizing support and does not develop its own experience or expertise, which it should be doing if it is to demonstrate commitment to improving disabled access.

Funding—DSA problems

Full-time students in receipt of a mandatory award can apply for the DSA as part of their award to pay for the support they require. Note that part-time students cannot apply, which could open up all kinds of equal opportunity issues for debate. There are three allowances to cover need (Olohan, 1995).

- General Allowance—miscellaneous expenses in 1994-95 was a maximum of £1,185.
- Specialist Equipment Allowance—in 1994-95 was a maximum of £3,325.
- Non-Medical Helpers Allowance—e.g. for notetakers, interpreters, etc. in 1994-95 was a maximum of £4,730.

It must also be noted that the DSA is 'means tested', and as with mandatory awards LEAs can vary in their administration procedures. Olohan (1995) and Luker (1995) suggest that the DSA does not meet the costs some students incur. Interpreters, notetakers, etc are expensive, for example an interpreter can charge approximately £20 per hour. As a result of costs exceeding funds students often have to 'make do', for example a student coming to SHU, from a school where provision of resources was very good, may be used to having an interpreter *and* notetaker for every lecture. However, costs may mean they can only afford to have one at SHU (or any HE institution).

Quality and Reliability—of provision of support

HISS cannot guarantee that support for classes will always be available. They have a pool of 20 interpreters/communication support workers to use, but often demand outstrips supply. This in turn tends to mean quality is compromised. HISS prefer to employ notetakers that are graduates themselves, preferably in a similar subject to that which the student is studying, however, this is not always possible. Notetaking is a highly developed skill and as such quality in notetakers can vary. The same is the case for interpreters, communicators, and so on. The implications of not using subject knowledgeable notetakers/interpreters/communicators are such that the student could be disadvantaged by the limited knowledge, as highlighted by Luker (1995):

> Students spoke of notetakers struggling with unfamiliar jargon and technical concepts: it is feared that the lack of subject specialism makes the work of notetakers, etc., slow and incomplete. (p. 7).

Level of Support—central versus local?

> The resources provided to Deaf students may at times seem to separate them from their instructor. (Saur,1992)

Another issue which should be addressed is the fact that all of this provision of support can take place with little or no input/co-operation from the School in which the student is based (Luker, 1995). The course leader may be consulted, but often other lecturers know very little of the process (as it was in my case). Saur (1992) suggests that deaf students must be encouraged to contact their lecturers/tutors on a regular basis, if they are to benefit from the educational experience. Saur (1992) further suggests that liaison between the teacher of the deaf and the lecturer are important to ensure tutoring is in line with the lecturer's teaching goals.

Conclusions

The focus of this article has been supporting the learning of deaf students in HE. There are differing ways in which any student may approach learning, and the levels of support required can vary from one individual to another. In essence, deaf students are very similar to their hearing peers, however, the type of support they require is different, whether it be in technical or human resource terms. How a HE institute organizes this support can be all important.

> People who are deaf have the same range of intelligence and ability as other people, although the fulfilment of their potential may depend on the right type of support. (RNID, 1993, p. 2).

The case study of SHU highlighted elements of good practice, but more importantly illustrated the need for appropriate frameworks in which to supply support. It is evident that monitoring of support provision and dissemination of information are imperative in order to ensure continued quality of provision. A piecemeal or ad hoc response to the delivery of support for deaf students, or indeed disabled, would not be effective.

An important issue became clear through examination of literature and the analysis of the case study. When we make changes in support for the learning of deaf students we will almost certainly improve the support for ALL students. Pye and Rust (1994) suggest that as lecturers we should always be prepared for 'diversity' in our students and:

> Staff might find it useful to always ask themselves, when planning their next term's teaching 'have I taken account of all the following diverse groups—disabled, mature, international, dyslexic, ESL—or are any of the likely to be disadvantaged in any way?' (p. 13).

Having asked themselves this question it would be reasonable to assume that any changes to teaching method/delivery would lead to improvements in the support of learning for all students. Perhaps the real issue is how often is this question actually asked? A means of promoting consideration of this question would be for HE institutions to ensure that staff development schemes raise awareness levels amongst staff (academic and non-academic) of the issues that surround the support of deaf, and disabled students, as suggested by Luker (1995).

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1]   Seven Needs for Living'—Information, Peer Support, Accommodation, Equipment & Adaptations, Personal Assistance, Environmental Access and Transport (Sheffield Hallam University, 1994).

[2]   During the current HEFCE round of funding, which totalled £4.92 million, Sheffield Hallam University has been successful in a bid for a project entitled 'From Access to Assessment: An Enhanced Support for Disabled Students' (HEFCE Circular 23/96).

[3]   Data taken from UCAS forms, and as such may not be a true reflection of the actual numbers.

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