

Students who are Deaf

INTRODUCTION

There is a wide range of reasons for hearing loss, its extent, and its impact on students' lives. A small proportion have no hearing at all, while most will have a degree of residual hearing. A deaf student will already have a preferred communication method sorted out so do check out with them what this is.

Deaf students may use speech, lipreading, signing, a hearing aid, or any combination of these. More recent hearing loss may mean a student is less familiar with lipreading or signing, and might need additional support. Students may refer to themselves as Deaf, hard of hearing, partially deaf or something else; if you're not sure, check with the student what term they prefer.

Case Study

I was lucky to get a job straight from graduation and worked in industry before moving to the education sector in 1991. I was an in-house designer in a practice studio, then a studio manager, and finally became a lecturer as my job took on a more focused teaching role. I completed my PGCE four years ago, and now work as a part-time graphic design senior lecturer and freelance designer, as well as doing sessional teaching at several institutions. For the last two years I've taught a number of hearing impaired and deaf students, working closely with the support agency.

I was nervous when I first started teaching. Now, I usually have around 100 students, and to have such large numbers can be nerve-wracking enough, but then to have a deaf student as well! To deal with this I put time into preparation so it's as good as possible.

For me preparation is the key. If I know there's going to be a deaf student in my class the first thing I do is talk to the people concerned. I try to find out how much they can hear – and to check on how they want to be described: deaf, hearing-impaired etc. Most students are very open – hearing problems will be declared at the interview. I also speak to the support unit who will be providing interpreters. I do need to know in advance because of restructuring the session. I look at meeting the deaf student's needs first so as not to disadvantage them – the others are more flexible and often don't notice that things are different. Each deaf student is an individual, so I tailor the sessions to their needs. Most use a combination of communication – signing, lip-reading and so on. The support agency needs about 2-3 weeks warning, so timetables need to be really well organised in advance. The student's needs and the funding available determines the help they can get, and the agency has a large area to look after which is why timetables are so important.

Signers need a break every 20 minutes, which can create havoc in an hour lecture. You have to work around this and plan it in. Actually most people can't concentrate for more than 20 minutes, so a quick break or change of activity can be a good thing for everyone. You need to liaise with the other lecturers if you're team teaching.

I often use PowerPoint but I don't overload it. For presentations I use handouts as well and encourage the students to stop me and ask questions. In the past I've been caught out by talking about something, when it would have been better to have it written down.

Specialist language can be a big problem. The deaf students probably won't be familiar with the terms, and there may not be a sign for them. If you see the student looking puzzled it may be that others are as well, so it's not a bad idea to stop and explain to everyone. Otherwise I'll meet up in the break time with the deaf student and signer to ensure they have understood. It's also important not to be distracted and jump between subjects or they lose the plot, they have no way to follow and the signer can't keep up.

Interactive sessions are fun but need to be managed. I observe what's going on and step in if necessary – I'm on my toes all the time. I observe the interactions with other students and watch body language. When the students were working in teams, the deaf student didn't know who to look at and couldn't afford to keep the support staff to help her. The students were all talking at the same time. The team wasn't working well and the deaf student was finding it difficult. My colleagues found a "speaking stick" (actually it was just a yellow tennis ball) and only the person holding it could speak. This not only helped the deaf student, but the others too. That team came top, and we have encouraged the use of "speaking sticks" for all the teams!

In seminars the room layout is important. I don't sit someone else between me and the deaf student and signer. I usually have them sitting one on each side of me if we're around a table. I have to remember to sit back and not get my hands in the way. Even long, dangling earrings can be a distraction. If someone else is talking I'll tactfully point to them so the deaf student knows who to look at. It sounds like a lot of effort but to be honest it's not that much more than I'd do normally.

We track students through each module – we note each time we meet them and follow their work through the module, so we can pick up if there are any problems. We've found that this helps every student, not just the deaf ones, and one of my colleagues has developed some software for it. We have a personal tutorial programme, where students are seen at least once a semester. If a student isn't performing it will show in the tracking sheets and I try to pick up on it as quickly as possible and address the issues in a separate tutorial. Sometimes I'll chat to them over my lunch hour – it's a personal thing.

We also go offsite and visit agencies, and pick up client briefs. Then I ferry around 90 or so students to different agencies. The agencies will come to us at the end for the work to be presented. My deaf student was very concerned about going out, so I talked to the agencies first. They were great. The signer came along with us, but the agency was really good once I'd prepared them. The signer enjoyed it too! As a result the student was confident enough to get a work placement the following year with another agency.

Communication is the biggest problem. They miss additional information; if someone is behind them they won't be heard. It does take time and patience. You have to remember too that the signer will sign everything, even swearing and bad jokes, and will repeat everything the student says to you as well – they don't summarise!

If I see the student approaching I wave to make sure they're aware of me. Having an aid doesn't mean they can hear – only some sounds will be picked up, even with lip reading as well they won't pick up all you say. The deaf student's language skills are not likely to be as advanced, so a one-to-one on occasion can be useful to ensure that everything has been understood.

I use email a lot – I give my college email address, but I also give the deaf students my home email in case they need extra help. Even with my brightest deaf student, who was really good and went on to get a First, the email really showed up her problems with language. Effectively English can be a second language for those who've grown up deaf.

To someone starting out I'd say don't be afraid to make mistakes as long as you learn from it. Be honest with them and with yourself without appearing weak.

Don't overload yourself to the point where you resent the students – you need time to switch off too and they will demand as much as you'll give. Being effective is more important. Be assertive and strict with yourself and the students. I do put in extra time, but that's my decision so I don't moan about it. As a new tutor I found it's important to look for the solutions and the positive in every situation.

REFLECTION/CONTEXTUALISING

Having read this personal account, how does it relate to your own experience – or your expectations if you are about to start teaching a deaf student? What are the key things that need to be considered?

Deaf Students	Learning/Teaching			Assessment	Social Interaction/ group work
	Preparation	During session	Follow-up		
Issues					
Strategies					
Benefits					
What other support or information might you need?					
Where or who can you get this from?					

Points and Strategies

BRITISH SIGN LANGUAGE

Many, although not all, deaf students use British Sign Language (BSL), an indigenous language with its own syntax and vocabulary. Those who have been deaf since birth will have grown up using BSL, and may have a positive identity as members of the Deaf community. For these students English is effectively their second language, and consequently they may need additional help with written grammar etc. BSL may not have established signs for specialist art and design terms. For an excellent online resource of BSL signs for art and design terms, see www.artsigns.ac.uk

LEARNING SUPPORT WORKERS

A student using BSL may have an **interpreter** with them to translate – and possibly speak – for them. Interpreters will not be art and design specialists, so will not be familiar with the terminology, and it is not their role to join in the class or help teach the student, only to help communication.

The student may also use a **lip-speaker**, who repeats your words clearly so that the student can lipread, or a **note-taker**, who will write down key points.

- Give the interpreter or note-taker time to keep up, and allow short breaks in an intensive session – both activities need a lot of concentration
- Do make sure that you speak directly to the student, not to the interpreter
- Giving support workers copies of handouts, notes or glossaries prior to the session will help them ensure the student gets essential information

Points and Strategies

LIPREADING

Many deaf and hard of hearing people use lipreading to some extent. This is very tiring because of the level of concentration needed, so do allow breaks for other activities, and remember only about one third of speech sounds can be lip-read.

- Get the student's attention before you begin to speak
- Face the student and speak clearly, at a normal pace, without shouting or exaggerating sounds
- Keep your hands, pen etc away from your mouth
- Make sure you're not standing against the light
- They won't be able to lipread unfamiliar words, so write new terms on the board

HEARING AIDS

- Many hard of hearing and deaf students use a hearing aid in addition to the strategies mentioned above, but as all sounds are amplified and sense of direction of sound is lost, it can be difficult for students to cope with background noise levels in noisy rooms
- Find out whether seminar rooms etc are fitted with induction loops or radio aids, or whether portable aids are available. Make sure these are checked first, that the student is in the loop, and that whoever is speaking has the microphone or that you repeat questions before answering
- Remember to switch off the microphone when you leave the room, or your conversation will still be heard!

Points and Strategies

GROUP WORK

Group work can be difficult as the student may not know who is speaking or where to look. Encourage students to indicate when they are speaking, or you could point to each new speaker. Keep groups small wherever possible. For group discussions, arrange the seats in a circle.

HANDOUTS AND VISUAL AIDS

- Students cannot lipread or watch an interpreter while taking notes or reading overheads/handouts. It will help if any handouts can be given in advance
- Similarly, in slide shows or presentations the student cannot look at your lips or their interpreter and the slide – and if the room is dark they will not know what is being said. You could provide notes beforehand, pace your presentation to give catch-up time, and/or provide a small lamp for an interpreter

LECTURES

- A well-structured lecture will be easier to follow – words have more meaning if their context is understood
- Try to keep statements clear, avoiding jargon or complex structures
- Write essential practical information (such as room changes) on the board
- Provide a list of key or specialist terms, or write new terms on the board
- The student may benefit from sitting at the front, but remember to repeat other students' questions before answering them

GROUP CRITS AND BRAINSTORMING

These are very difficult for deaf students, who won't be able to keep up or see who is speaking. An organised approach where students take turns to speak will be much easier to follow.

Points and Strategies

DARKROOMS

You will need to give instructions in a lighted area first, before going into the darkroom.

DEMONSTRATING EQUIPMENT

You will need to explain and give instructions first, then demonstrate the equipment, then check for understanding.

ONE-TO-ONE TUTORIALS

Ensure that the student can see you clearly. A lipreader or signer will need to sit next to you, while a note-taker should sit next to the student.

USING MACHINERY

When learning to use machinery, make sure that you do a thorough risk assessment for deaf students. Noisy rooms make hearing aids useless, audio alarms on machinery will not be heard, and the student cannot see or watch the machine and follow your instructions. It is essential, first, to make sure the situation is safe for the student, and then work with them to ensure they understand your instructions. Many students will feel and work from the vibration of the machinery.

ASSESSMENT

Students' additional requirements for assessment should already have been considered, so it's a good idea to discuss these with your Programme Leader. Deaf students should be included in all assessment activities if at all possible, but some adjustments may well need to be made.

USEFUL LINKS AND RESOURCES

Students who are
Deaf

www.artsigns.ac.uk

an online BSL/English Glossary for Art and Design Education

www.deafandcreative.ac.uk

an online careers site for deaf students

www.wlv.ac.uk/teachingdeafstudents/booklet.htm

A clear, short and helpful booklet which can be downloaded and photocopied, which gives a guide to good practice for staff teaching deaf students in art, design and communication.