Learning,Teaching and Assessment with Deaf Students

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Introduction

The increase in numbers of students entering higher education (HE) has forced the sector to think creatively about new ways of including a greater variety of students through radical changes to learning, teaching and assessment (Biggs 2003: 1-4). This has been further focused for students with disabilities and specific needs through the widening access and participation agenda (cf. Equality Challenge Unit 2006), the introduction of the Disability Discrimination Act (1995) and its application to education in the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act (SENDA) (2001) (Cf. Disability Rights Commission, 2002). Though SENDA has required HE institutions to be more inclusive of students with disabilities and specific needs, many approaches to learning, teaching and assessment are, in my view, less than adequate. For example, pre-SENDA guidance from the Royal National Institute for the Blind, advises that a student with a visual impairment may be given extra time in an examination from between 25% to 100% (Hutchinson et. al. 1998: 266). This is not unusual practice for many students with disabilities and specific needs today. With examinations up to 3 hours in length, adding to that another 45 minutes can only have a negative impact and add to

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the distress of a student trying to meet the demands of such a long assessment. Similarly, Jarvis and Knight (2003: 59-76) provide advice on learning and teaching in the support of students with a variety of hearing impairments, but most of the suggestions are about small changes to current practices so that Deaf people can fit in to what is already in place. Universities cannot be blamed too much if the action they take is less then adequate if it is based on the advice they are given. This paper argues for more radical changes towards including one group, Deaf people, in HE, and outlines my attempt at achieving that inclusion. It is not perfect or necessarily transferable to every situation, but it does go beyond the usual mediocre attempts to facilitate the learning of many students with disabilities and specific needs.

The Deaf community and British Sign Language

It is estimated that there are between 50,000 (RNID 2003) and 100,000 (Alker 2000: 27) members of the Deaf community in the United Kingdom today, though Ladd suggests that figure may be as high as 120,000 (Ladd 2003: 33). Such a big margin between the lower and upper ends of this estimate demonstrates the problems of identifying who precisely is a member of the Deaf community. For example, there can be two people with precisely the same medical condition that prevents them from hearing, but one may be a member of the Deaf community and one may not. This is because membership of the Deaf community is largely determined by the following four factors: the severity of the hearing impairment, usually profound hearing loss; the age at which a person becomes Deaf, usually before the acquisition of a spoken language; the person's ability in and use of British Sign Language (BSL) as their first or preferred method of communication; the person's participation in a community of other similar people who view and understand the world through what has become known as 'Deaf culture' (cf. Alker 1996: 178-9 and Ladd 2003: 35). The upper case 'D' for 'Deaf' is used to distinguish the Deaf community from other groups with a hearing impairment (approximately a further eight million people (RNID 2003)) who may be 'deaf' or 'hard of hearing' but who do not use BSL and are not a part of Deaf culture (Ladd 2003: 33). Most Deaf people, 90%, who are born with a severe hearing loss are usually not the children of existing members of the Deaf Community but rather the children of hearing parents. Participation in the Deaf community may or may not be encouraged by parents and so some become members as infants and acquire BSL and others do not (Gregory and Knight 1999: 4). Some come to the Deaf community as teenagers or adults having lost their hearing before acquiring spoken language and they go on to learn a spoken language with varying degrees of success and never participate in the Deaf community.

BSL is a full and complete language, as capable of the full range and complexity of expression as any spoken language (Pinker 1994: 36) and since 2003 has been recognised as an indigenous language of the United Kingdom?the third most commonly used after English and Welsh (BDA 2004). Despite many misconceptions, there is no t one universal sign language but many different sign languages in most countries and many nations even have regional variations or 'dialects' (Sutton-Spence and Woll 1998: 29). They are languages that have no written format largely because of the way the language is constructed and the variety of different ways a phrase can be expressed.

Deaf education before university

The education of Deaf people over the last two hundred and fifty years does not make enjoyable reading. Throughout this period the discussions and debates have largely focussed in primary and secondary education on the most appropriate methods by which to educate Deaf children and teenagers (see, for example, Lane (1989) Gregory et al (1998), Watson et. al. (2001) and Power and Leigh (2004)). The failure of Deaf educationalists, who are more often than not hearing, to find consensus on the best methods of helping Deaf children to learn, and the generally poorer levels of Deaf academic success compared to hearing people (Lane 1999: 130-1), has previously made any discussion of Deaf people in HE largely irrelevant because Deaf people have rarely made it that far. That is now slowly changing as will be discussed later.

The debate on whether Deaf students should learn through a spoken language or a sign language led to an international conference in Milan in 1880 of Deaf educationalists. At this conference an agreement was ratified that

Deaf education should focus primarily on teaching Deaf children to speak, read and write and that sign language should be banished from use in schools in order to facilitate the learning of the spoken language (Lane 1989: 387). The implication of this decision was also that all other areas of learning, for example, the sciences and the humanities would take a secondary place to learning to speak, read and write. This approach to Deaf education has been known as 'oralism' or the 'oral method' and served as the predominant method of Deaf education for the following century. Only from the 1960s onwards, with the recognition that sign languages were full and complete languages (Stokoe 1960), did oralism begin to not only be questioned (this had always been happening) but to seriously be challenged. The oral method of Deaf education has been criticised on a number of levels.

The first criticism is that oralism as an educational method simply does not work. Woll has shown in studies conducted with Deaf infants that in the crucial years of language acquisition (under the age of five years) they learn spoken words at a much slower rate than hearing infants. He has also demonstrated that Deaf infants can learn sign language at a rate that is parallel to hearing infants' acquisition of spoken language (Woll 1998: 60-65). The oral method, even before school, disadvantages Deaf children from the very beginning because if it is followed, it is likely that their language competency will be impaired in comparison to hearing children. Secondly, this method is criticised because in schools teaching Deaf children to speak, read and write takes up far more time than literacy does for hearing children so that other areas of learning are sidelined. Hearing children do not generally continue to have classes in basic linguistic abilities beyond the first few years. In addition, older Deaf people have many stories from their experience at school of the very cruel methods used to stop them using their hands to communicate. If one were to read any book or journal on the subject of Deaf education published even up until 2005 you will find them dominated by the same questions of what is the best method of Deaf education (see, for example, Lane (1989) Gregory et al (1998), Watson et. al. (2001) and Power & Leigh (2004) and any edition of *Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education*[1] 1996-2006). There is very little in any of the literature on how to teach Deaf children science, mathematics, the humanities, information technology and so on.

The oralists argue that unless Deaf people can speak, read and write, their ability to participate and contribute to society is impaired so oralism has to be the priority. This claim leads me to my third criticism of this model. Oralism, in my view, is largely about normalisation and is consistent with other Victorian and early 20th century approaches to difference: try to eliminate the difference in the person and if all else fails, hide the person away (Lane 1999: 26-8). It cannot be denied that it is easier for the rest of society if Deaf people can speak, lip?read, read and write. This can be ar gued to be advantageous to the Deaf person too as communication problems could become minimal.

Teaching Deaf children to speak and read, however, is not straightforward, especially without another language by which the spoken language can be learned. However, based on research such as that by Woll above, if Deaf children learn BSL first, by the time they get to school they have a full language they can use through which to learn a second language and other skills (Swanwick 1998: 111). If they are discouraged from using BSL at first diagnosis and then taught orally, most Deaf children will not get a full grasp of any language, although there are some exceptions. It is all too convenient for society to expect all Deaf people to communicate in the same way as hearing people. It is practically easier and economically expedient if Deaf people do not need interpreters and can communicate face to face with hearing people.

Methods of teaching Deaf children have over the past twenty years changed considerably so that no one single method of teaching is employed, but a variety of, arguably, fragmented methods. 'Oralism' continues to be the predominant method of teaching Deaf children, not least because of the increase in student numbers to 'mainstream' schools ((Hutchinson et. al. 1998: 68; Ladd 2003: 158; Duffin 2005: 6). Other methods now include the 'bilingual' method, which argues that children should learn BSL first and then use that first language as a tool for learning a second, English. The arguments for this method are gaining momentum globally, as the collection by Power and Leigh (2004) demonstrates, though the oralists are not letting go without a fight (Ladd, 2003, 158). Another approach to Deaf education is one of total communication (Baker and Knight 1998: 77-87). In practice, this means using every possible method to get the message across. In work with a school for Deaf children in Zimbabwe in 1999 I observed

this method being used. The positive was that signing was openly and freely used in school. The negative was that teachers spoke and signed at the same time. Because sign language and English have different grammars, this method unfortunately ends up using a mixture of the two which ultimately inhibited complex teaching and deep learning because there was no real communication in any language. It is also worth recognising that a small but slowly increasing number of teachers of Deaf children are themselves Deaf adults. Teachers of Deaf children must today engage in a specialist teaching qualification at Masters level offered by a number of universities across the United Kingdom (e.g. Manchester and Birmingham) bringing a much needed level of professionalism to this specialist area of teaching.

Deaf people in higher education

In light of the changes described above, Jarvis and Knight (2003: 59) note that 'more and more deaf students are entering higher education and institutions and following courses alongside their hearing peers'. In HE, staff are usually specialists in research of their subject discipline rather than having expertise in a particular approach to teaching, learning and assessment (Stefani, 2004-5: 51) and so there are few academics with the language skills to be able to support Deaf people in their learning in HE. Many Deaf people do not have skills in English to the level that would ordinarily be expected of hearing students in HE because of the reasons outlined above. Most resources for students are made available in the medium of English meaning that Deaf students who struggle with this language are disadvantaged from accessing these resources without support. These are very practical problems concerning the inclusion of Deaf people in HE. It is not practical for every member of HE staff to have BSL skills and not all would develop competencies to teach in that language. This problem has been overcome in one Deaf Studies department at the University of Central Lancashire where, a member of staff there informed me, Deaf students are assessed in BSL for some of their modules but, for the purposes of external examination, every assessment is translated into English. This is costly but it allows Deaf students to be assessed in their own language and overcomes any potential problems with quality assurance. Without more investment, however, it is questionable in the current climate whether Deaf people will ever be fully able to participate in the university sector on an equal basis with everyone else.

There are some useful parallels that can be made between Deaf students and international students. Ladd argues that Deaf people should be seen as a linguistic minority group with a unique culture more than as disabled people (Ladd 2003: 35-6). International students, like Deaf people, often come to education in the United Kingdom with a different first language and cultural background to their fellow learners. Biggs identifies three methods of inclusion that are adopted by staff within HE for international students: Teaching as 'assimilation', teaching as 'accommodation' and teaching as 'educating' (Biggs 2003: 138-9). Teaching as 'assimilation' means that international students must become like everyone else to fit in. Students will only succeed if they can behave and learn in the same way as home students and the responsibility for that lies with the learner rather than the teacher. Teaching as 'accommodation' is a method that tries to address individual problems students may encounter by accommodating them into 'normal' teaching practices. A student may, for example, be allowed to record a lecture or have individual tutorials, but teaching and assessment methods are not reviewed in order to include international students alongside home students. Teaching as 'educating' involves the teacher working to teach better and they do so by engaging with the contexts of all their the students in order to try to understand them, and by so doing, the teacher works to apply their teaching to meet their students' needs. In other words, a teacher does not try to make students fit into their methods of teaching but works to fit their teaching around the needs of the students (See Biggs 2003: 138-9).

Deaf people will never be included by simply trying to make them fit into the same mould as everyone else by using the assimilation method. Their access to learning resources, including their tutors, will be inhibited because they are asked, in an assimilation model, to learn in a second language. If their learning experience is diminished in this way, so their assessments will also reflect that. Even if access to adequate learning and teaching were available to Deaf people, their ability to reflect their learning, skills, abilities, potential and achievement is diminished if they are assessed in the same way as hearing people. In contrast to international students, without hearing, Deaf people often struggle much harder in acquiring English, though if they have BSL, acquiring English is made easier.

Accommodating Deaf people into teaching and learning is also not a viable option that will enable the students to succeed to the best of their abilities. Some Deaf people who have a good use of English study for undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications and are supported by interpreters, note takers, voice recognition technology and other assistive methodologies (RNID 2006). Deaf people can often be assisted to some effect in this way. However, they will always be on the margins in HE if they have little direct contact with the teacher or their fellow students because their communication is always mediated by someone or something else. As with the assimilation model, if students are marginalised in their learning, assessments will reflect their diminished learning. When it comes to assessments, Deaf people are still often expected to deliver the assessment through the medium of English though RNID do, rather timidly, suggest in small print at the bottom of one of their advice pages that BSL might be used in assessments (RNID 2006) and this is not beyond the realm of possibility as the University of Central Lancashire demonstrates.

Deaf people are at worst expected to assimilate in HE or at best, they are accommodated. It is important that Deaf people's experience goes beyond this so that they can participate in Biggs' educating model and experience real and deep learning. It must be emphasised that lower literacy levels should not be equated with a lower level of intelligence. Not having high levels of English does not mean that Deaf people are intellectually incapable of studying. It is not an inability to learn that has precluded Deaf people from studying in universities but the fact that Deaf people are a minority group whose language needs have not been dealt with effectively at school, because they do not acquire English easily, and for those who do get to HE, because academic staff usually do not have the right skills, enough time or resources to teach Deaf people in a truly inclusive way. The new legislation on disability pertaining to education and the recognition of BSL as a national language of the UK will soon, if not yet, demand that universities are more radical in their approach to the inclusion of students from the Deaf Community. Deaf people will expect it and challenge those institutions who are not prepared to engage with them to develop an inclusive approach to teaching, learning and assessment. Below are some reflections on my attempt to develop a course that is concerned with educating, deep learning and real inclusion for members of the Deaf Community.

Developing a programme in ministry in British Sign Language

The beginnings of the project

Toohey argues that, 'most models of course design suggest that a comprehensive needs analysis should be the first step in the process' (Toohey 1999: 21). Here I attempt to outline how this programme began and the research conducted to get the programme to be as good as it could be. I have already argued above why I think there is a need for the HE sector to looks at ways of more fully including Deaf people. My interest in this subject emerges out of work with the Deaf Community and academic research in theology and Deafness. I am also a member of the Church of England's Committee for Ministry among Deaf and Disabled People (CMDDP) which, among other things, advises dioceses and the Archbishops' Council on matters relating to the ministry of and among Deaf people. Deaf people serve on this committee and, with CMDDP, had been trying to develop some training for Deaf people actively involved in Christian Ministry. It was in this context that the idea of a course in Christian Ministry began. A number of events had been successfully organised but there seemed to be a need and a desire for a more formal programme and more detailed study. In discussions with members of the committee I suggested seeing if there could be a way of formalising and developing training with the existing networks of CMDDP to produce an innovative programme in which Deaf people could be taught and learn modules relevant to their ministry using a pedagogical approach designed around BSL and the Deaf community. This idea drew support from CMDDP, University of Chester and the Subject Centre for PRS and from then work began on a programme in Christian Ministry that would be delivered through a collaborative partnership with CMDDP.

Those with professional experience of working in social work, teaching, counselling and ministry who have gone on to specialise in work alongside Deaf people invariably agree that you cannot simply carry on in the same way as you did before and only change your practice by using BSL. The work of the professional must be radically transformed if their work is to be effective with Deaf people and take into account Deaf culture and experience (e.g. Cromwell 2005: 3-5).

Similarly, it was clear that developing teaching, learning and assessment methodologies that are fully inclusive of Deaf people and meet their needs would require more than simply adapting current practices. It needed new and creative ways of thinking about teaching and learning that does not involve words or text books or hearing culture, but uses visual communication and is relevant to a community and culture that experiences the world through sight, touch and smell and whose language is quite unlike English. This was to be no small task, but with the commitment of my colleagues at the University and on CMDDP, we have a programme that will begin in September 2006.

Initial research

Prior to beginning work on the programme, in addition to research into Deaf education discussed above, some initial research was done into the kind of training Deaf people would be most interested in receiving. A video was recorded at a national conference of Deaf people who attend churches or are involved in ministry at which they were asked questions about the kinds of subjects they would be most interested in studying. Out of all those who expressed their views, many wanted more training to be made available in the areas of biblical studies, theology and doctrine, and liturgy and worship. These areas of study reflected the needs of the group at that particular conference, and it was probable that this group would be those who would be most likely to take up and commit themselves to a programme of study. The identified areas were written up as three twenty credit modules at level one and were tested out with CMDDP, representatives from Deaf Anglicans Together,[2] an ecumenical network of Deaf clergy, and Signs of God, a network of Christian interpreters. They were all in agreement that these modules reflected current training needs for Deaf people. A number of chaplains among Deaf people also tested the ideas out with Deaf people in their congregations.

Establishing a collaborative partnership

Staff at the University of Chester do not have the pedagogical or linguistic skills to teach Deaf people without the support of CMDDP and the organisations listed above. The Theology and Religious Studies Department has a long, established, and successful history of working collaboratively with the churches and providing and/or accrediting programmes in Christian Ministry. Together it was possible to see that the programme could work. A collaborative partnership[3] was set up between CMDDP and the University of Chester supported by the other groups. One condition of the partnership was that at least 50% of the tutors on the programme should be Deaf themselves. With nine Deaf clergy in the Church of England, with theological training and ministerial experience, this condition was possible. It was imperative for this to happen not only for equality of opportunity, but also for Deaf people to be able to own the course and for some of the issues concerning the need to understand Deaf culture to be overcome.

Establishing systems for consultation

After establishing the collaborative partnership, because of the new nature of the course, learning from the experience of others who have been involved in delivering or participating in adult education with Deaf people and in ministry with the Deaf community was essential. At each stage of the process of writing the modules, the content was discussed with a small programme planning team consisting of representatives from the groups described above. This consultation proved to be invaluable in terms of not only the content on the modules, but also in terms of developing teaching learning and assessment methodologies that would help students to learn and show their learning in ways that used the strengths of the Deaf community, were relevant to the Deaf community and BSL, and did not impose hearing methodologies on to the programme. Again the involvement of Deaf people in discussions and planning was crucial.

Developing a Church Colleges' Certificate in Ministry

Because many Deaf people who would be likely to apply for the course would not meet the usual formal entry qualifications for undergraduate study, it was agreed between the CMDDP and the University of Chester that the most appropriate programme of study to begin this project would be a Church Colleges' Certificate in Ministry (CCCM).

Church Colleges' Certificates are designed for those who wish to pursue any area of study in theology, ministry, biblical or religious studies. They also promote wider access and participation by stating that, 'The programme is open access; anyone who would benefit from the study may join the programme. This is assessed at interview. There are no formal entry requirements' (University of Chester 2006). For this programme of study fluency in BSL was made a requirement and an ability to 'navigate the internet' using English would be needed but not fluency in English.

The CCCM programme is made up of 60 credits at level one and is offered by all members of the church colleges and universities in England and Wales. Not only does this specific programme provide access to HE to students who may ordinarily be excluded, the programme can be delivered as a whole, usually within one year of parttime study. This makes the programme manageable for collaborative partners such as CMDDP, and for students new to the sector. Successful completion of the CCCM provides progression to a CertHe in Ministry and that in turn provides access to a BTh Honours degree. The programme would be held together and be developed holistically in order to support students not only in developing subject specific knowledge and understanding but also key and transferable skills that involve theological reflection, working as a team, and skills in information technology.

Designing the programme

Programmes of study in HE should not simply be random mixes of modules but rather they should provide opportunities for students to develop, and build on a variety of skills across modules (Toohey 1999: 68) and make links and connections between old and new learning (Nightingale and O'Neil 1994: 54-56). These principles were central to the design of this programme. The programme was given a framework for design within the CCCM and the university's modular programmes. However, in terms of this specific programme there were certain elements that were central to its design that needed to be embedded in the programme in order to design a programme that would meet the originally identified needs discussed above.

Subject knowledge and understanding

Students need to develop 'knowledge of the underlying concepts and principles associated with their area(s) of study, and an ability to evaluate and interpret these within the context of that area of study' (QAA 2001). The areas of study that would make up this programme were identified through the market research and put into a modular framework. Biblical Studies, Theological Studies and the Study of Worship and Liturgy work together well in a programme designed to train students in skills in Christian Ministry. Biblical and Theological Studies are often core disciplines in any programme in theology and enables students to meet a number of the subject benchmarks in the discipline. (QAA 2006). Liturgy and Worship is usually an optional module in Theological Studies but fits well with the other two in a programme training students for ministry. The primary difference between this and any other programme in Ministry was that a pedagogy relevant to the Deaf community should be used that should be developed in such a way that students receive a comparable qualification to any other student with a CCCM. Ensuring that development of knowledge and understanding of students in the subject areas identified and finding ways of assessing that was key to the design of the programme.

Ensuring the programme was relevant to Christian ministry

Many of the students entering the programme will be involved in ministries such as preaching and leading worship, though not necessarily in the context of the Deaf community. If students do not have a ministerial context, they will work with their tutor to find one through a placement. One of the key disciplines of training in ministry is that of theological reflection: the creative engagement of theological and biblical studies with human experience, society, and personal practice (cf. Graham et. al. 2005: 6). It is also often used as the tool of reflective practice for those in full time ministry (Bennett 2004: 21). This discipline is the methodology that is at the heart of the programme and students are given opportunity in every module to apply their experience to the subject matter and their developing knowledge and understanding of the subject matter to their experience, each informing and enhancing the other in creative dialogue.

Embedding Deaf culture into the design process

Understanding the role of the Deaf community in the programme and the use of BSL as the primary language poses a number of challenges. All tutors need to be fluent in BSL and be able to facilitate learning in that language. The programme documentation thus states that all tutors must have BSL level three in order to teach on the programme4 or be Deaf people, fluent in BSL. In order for Deaf people to be able to apply their learning to a specific ministerial context, the students must have some understanding of that context and so must their tutors. To reflect this, each module contains content that works to develop knowledge and understanding of the Deaf community alongside subject knowledge and understanding. Using theological reflection, these two disciplines of ministry and studies in the Deaf community come together. Deaf individual and communal experience will also impact on the way in which Deaf people engage with the transmission of Christian traditions through different cultures, languages and experiences to their own. This implies also that Deaf people will engage with the tradition differently from their own experience.

It is well established in Christian theology, biblical studies and liturgical studies that experience can be a source and resource for the emergence of new ways of doing theology, liturgy or biblical study and for understanding and interpreting other traditions. Parratt (2004) gives a useful oversight of many theologies that emerge using this method. Black experience, the experience of the poor in Latin America, Dalits in India and those under the apartheid regime of South Africa all developed theologies and new ways of reading texts and understanding the nature of God in ways that come out of their experience, in these examples, of various types of oppression. That experience is the source and resource of theologies of liberation and freedom. This programme, by using theological reflection and models of reading the Bible and theology and leading and using liturgy and worship will help students to continue to develop theologies that emerge out of Deaf experience and are pertinent to their ministerial practice.

Evaluating the programme design: theological reflection as a tool for reflective practice in theological education

Reflective practice is an increasingly common aspect of many professional roles and this is true in both education (Brockbank and McGill 1998: 108-126) and ministry (Bennett 2004: 21 and Ward 2005: 15-16). In 2005, I led a module in reflective practice for Christian youth workers at the University of Chester and we have a number of modules designed for people in Christian ministry that use theological reflection as a method of reflective practice. Theological reflection can be used as a critical tool for those involved in Christian adult education too, modelled by Hull (1991: xi) in talking of the need for a 'practical theology' in relation to adult Christian education and Bennett (2004).

Methods of theological reflection will be used as key tools not only in the delivery of the programme, but in the evaluation and enhancement of the programme by the programme team. Theological reflection is a tool for learning from experience and at each stage of the design process, experience of the Deaf community, educators and the issues that arise out of the design will be reflected on using this methodology with a view to initiating change. Using the experience of the programme itself as a starting point, we will use educational theory, practice and experience to inform our understanding of what we do alongside our understanding of Deaf culture and experience, and use theology to help inform the process in working towards future enhancement and development. Student evaluations will be especially important in informing theological reflection on the programme.

Learning and teaching

Forming students for ministry

'Formation' is often cited as a key aspect of many programmes preparing people for ministry (e.g. Church of England 2000). Formation is often understood as being different to academic study by providing opportunities for spiritual growth and development in such a way that prepares students to be alongside people in ministry (Church of England

2000: 30). In work I have done with readers and other lay training programmes, some of the key ways in which students have valued formative experiences have been through working together, worshipping together, learning in ways that are embedded in the Christian tradition and informed by the student community's spiritual journey together. However, increasingly 'The intellectual dominance of a position that marginalizes faith commitment and its contribution to critical enquiry is now a matter of debate rather than simply a premise' (Oxford University 2006). Frances Young, however, a prominent theologian and Methodist minister speaking from personal experience argues that 'My whole being is shaped by theological searching, responding to God, yet revealed as one with us in Christ Jesus' (Young 2002: 1). Academic study and spiritual growth can be part of the same journey?each of these will be an important part of this programme of training and formation for ministry.

Methods appropriate to Deaf people

Students will engage in workshops, discussions, seminars, group work, tutor led sessions and student led presentations all using British Sign Language. Students will have access to performance texts (see later) pertaining to their module of study, accessed through the University's intranet. Most teaching will be done on residential weekends, though self-directed study will take place in between, supported in the first module by exercises completed and submitted online. As well as being important in training for ministry, group work is an important part of the learning process for Deaf students. The modules have been designed specifically to engage students in group work together because one of the primary learning resources students will use in the programme will be their own and others' experience. Every module includes teaching and reflection on issues surrounding the Deaf community. Each module then encourages the students to engage their experience with their learning about biblical studies, theology and liturgy.

e-Learning

e-Learning is increasingly becoming an important part of the HE sector (Biggs 2003: 213). The Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Chester also has a long history of delivering modules and programmes through flexible and distributed learning. Because the students on this programme will be studying part-time and living in various locations, it would be advantageous to students to be able to access materials on the internet. However, the internet is very word based and some knowledge of English is necessary in order to be able to use it?this poses a problem for Deaf users. During the consultations, I asked whether it would be appropriate to use the web to create a learning community through discussion boards in between central face to face sessions. It was felt that this was inappropriate because discussion boards operate using English. Discussion boards using BSL images meant that students would need sophisticated and expensive technology in their homes to be able to record their contribution and make it available on the web for other participants to view. The quality of signing on domestic 'web cams' is often very poor and so it was felt that discussion boards would not be useful as we did not want to use English.

The internet can, however, be used for research purposes. Again, because the internet is so English based, this has the potential to be problematic to Deaf students. However, in one of the department's biblical studies modules, students use the internet to find paintings and art that represent biblical stories or passages. Students then compare the artistic representations against the narrative of the text in order to reflect on the ways that different times and cultures interpret biblical narratives. The programme team agreed to look at adapting this for use with Deaf people and it was introduced as part of the assessment for a module in biblical studies. Some parts of the Bible have already been translated into BSL and these could be used alongside the artistic representations to look at how culture, place and time influence the interpretation of the narrative. This is intended to allow students to develop subject specific knowledge and understanding, transferable skills in using the internet and in basic research. There is also a growing number of resources for Deaf people on the internet whereby materials are signed and can be streamed to home computers. For example, there is a website that includes a short dictionary of Christian signs and a number of short personal stories of faith development produced last year (CDL UK: 2005). The other way in which it was decided that the internet would be useful to the programme was through the development of resources to support learning called

'Performance texts'

Performance texts are an innovation of this programme designed to support student learning and resource students throughout their programme. Performance texts are an equivalent of text books and other scholarly works. They involve presentations, discussions and seminars on key areas of study pertinent to each module in the programme. So, for example, in a module such as biblical studies, a student may ordinarily use a text book to inform themselves about a subject such as biblical exegesis. They may be provided with an introduction to the method, some examples of how it works, and some exercises to try the approach it for themselves. They would then read more widely around the ways in which exegesis can be approached and enhance their understanding. They may be encouraged to think about the ways in which their own experience influences and shapes the way they approach biblical exegesis and the kind of personal 'baggage' they bring to the text (cf. Evans 1999). Performance texts will support what is delivered to students in the classroom by acting in a similar way to a textbook. The main difference will be that the material is available in British Sign Language, recorded using professional equipment, and then can be streamed to the student's home computer through the University's intranet site. These are being developed in order to meet the learning and teaching needs of the students. Performance texts, and face to face sessions, along with the use of mentors (discussed below) will also provide opportunities to ensure students are informed of the outcomes and standards expected of them.

Mentors

Because this programme is located at level C in the FHEQ, and students are to have significant periods of time between residential weekends and face to face sessions, it was thought that students would need to be able to have access to some tutorial support in between sessions. Students often need this kind of support when they begin studying, particularly mature students who, in this instance, have been out of education a long time and have no experience of HE.5 The CMDDP has a network of approximately 40 licensed chaplains in the dioceses of the Church of England, all with varying BSL skills, theological training and experience of ministry and in particular ministry among Deaf people. The programme team agreed that these networks could usefully be used to support students in their learning and understanding expectations of the students, by offering relevant pastoral support, being a local point of contact for any queries about their studies, being a critical friend, and supporting students in preparing for locally based tasks such as preparing a led act of worship Liturgy and Worship Module. Mentors will be inducted into their role by the university and their work with students will be monitored throughout the programme.

Assessment

Wakeford (1999:59) argues that 'effective assessment will reflect truthfully some combination of an individual's abilities, achievement, skills and potential'. Deaf people are clearly disadvantaged in assessment if they are not able to be assessed in their first or preferred language and are not given the same opportunities to demonstrate their abilities, achievement, skills and potential.

Reflective practice in assessments

As discussed earlier, the key methodology used in this module will be one of theological reflection. This is also the methodology underpinning the development of approaches to teaching, learning and assessment in the programme. It was clear that students will need careful induction in to this process through teaching and input from tutors, opportunities to practise the method, formative assessments to test their grasp of the method, and summative assessment to make this an integral part of the whole programme. In teaching this method to other students at level one, I have often found many struggle to grasp the idea early on unless I break down the process of theological reflection for them and support them through each stage. In my experience, students often get better at it through practice. They also enhance their ability to do theological reflection by understanding their own culture and context

better, and by developing knowledge and understanding, and later at levels two and three critical skills pertinent to the discipline of theology. Tutors will need to model theological reflection for students as part of the induction into the method. Students will be supported in their use of it in assessment by assessment tasks breaking the method of theological study up into manageable tasks which has worked elsewhere in modules I have taught.

Group work

Because Deaf people's culture is one of vision and touch, the role of the Deaf community, engagement with other people, is an important part of what it means to be Deaf. In addition, because Deaf people use a different language from the majority of hearing people they often find themselves isolated in the wider communities in which they live. Being a part of a community and interaction with other Deaf people is a part of what it means to be Deaf and so as well as the teaching and learning strategy involving group work, that should also be understood as part of the formation of Deaf people, both for ministry and for summative assessment.

In a programme with Chester Diocese, Foundations for Ministry, accredited by University of Chester, one of the modules in this programme is entirely concerned with group work and an individual's contribution to group dynamics. This module was introduced to the programme in 2004 which is designed to help people discover their own ministry and begin training for a variety of licensed ministries. One the key characteristics of being in ministry is that individuals must be able to work as part of a team or group and yet students could write three essays on theology and pass the course with distinction but be unable to work with anyone. Again this re-emphasises the importance of assessment that examines skills and abilities that are 'fit for purpose' (Brown 2004-5: 81).

This element of being able to collaborate with others and work together was a part of the design of the programme in ministry for Deaf students. They will work together on a biblical text, presenting it dramatically in a way that engages the text with Deaf experience. The two will engage in conversation with each other, an established method of biblical hermeneutics, to produce a new reading of the text. Students will be given a group mark based on the presentation, the quality of the biblical interpretation, and their understanding of the methods used to develop the presentation, assessed through a structured group discussion. Students will also be assessed on their contribution to the overall presentation.

The use of group work as a method of assessment in this context, therefore, is intended to form an integral part of all teaching, learning and assessment. It is part of teaching and learning because it prepares people for summative assessment and is a part of summative assessment, it is a key skill in ministry, it engages with Deaf culture and Deaf experience, and provides an opportunity for the assessment of a student's knowledge and understanding of, in one module, biblical hermeneutics and the ability to apply it in the presentation of the text. Deaf people often present biblical texts dramatically in liturgy and worship and this is an established part of many Deaf services. This particular assessment also provides students with opportunities to examine and enhance their own practice, therefore, and to have a deeper knowledge and understanding of how to use biblical hermeneutics in the dramatisation of texts in liturgy.

Work-based assessments: application to ministry

The other primary area of assessment proposed for this programme is that of applying skills and learning in real contexts of ministry such as in leading worship or in the preparation of a piece of communication to a church group. The University of Chester has a long history of assessing work-based learning and it is increasingly becoming a part of the HE sector through Foundation Degrees (DfES 2005). Students will be asked to preach and lead acts of worship with their congregations and to reflect on their learning to both demonstrate knowledge and understanding of what they are doing and in order to enhance personal ministerial practice. Again, theological reflection will be a key methodology here and this underpins this work-based element of the assessment methods.

Assessment criteria in BSL: ensuring parity of assessment

All assessed work at the University of Chester has been marked according to assessment criteria and learning outcomes which match criteria in the wider academic infrastructure such as QAA, FHEQ and subject benchmarks. The learning outcomes are obviously unique to the individual programme and modules. Much of the assessment criteria already in place was transferable to Deaf people, such as assessing knowledge and understanding, ability to structure arguments, and assessing skills that may be transferable. However, the assessment criteria that covered communication skills needed to be changed. This was fairly straightforward. Hearing students are assessed for the quality of their written work and Deaf students will be assessed for signing with fluency in BSL. This is a further reason why appropriately qualified tutors were needed for the programme. Tutors with relevant BSL skills will be asked to assess ability to communicate in BSL using comparable criteria for those used in written assessments. The use of sources and reference also needed adaptation so that students make 'appropriate references to sources' as hearing students do in oral presentations. Theological reflection means that personal experience is a key resource in learning. The performance texts, internet, tutor input and corporate learning would all be other sources that need appropriate referencing. There is much here in parallel with oral assessments and presentations where students do not necessarily reference in the same way as in a written piece of work but they do show they have used sources and are advised on appropriate ways to reference their sources.

Conclusion

This programme is important because its success or otherwise has the potential for ramifications and positive benefits for all of HE as it works towards widening access and participation for a greater number of people. The programme is also important because BSL is now recognised as a full language and it has the capacity for the full range of expression of ideas that is equal to English. That in turn provides Deaf people with new and exciting opportunities to learn and develop using their own language on a par with their hearing peers. That is a reality that has never before been available to Deaf people but that will, with care and in time become more of a possibility.

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Endnotes

- Journal of Deaf Studies and Deaf Education is published quarterly by Oxford University Press
- Formerly, National Deaf Church Conference: an Anglican network of Deaf people supported by CMDDP and a national voice for Deaf people in the Church of England.
- The Collaborative Partnership was set up following QAA 2004 and University of Chester 2005.
- BSL Qualifications are awarded by the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People. There are four awards at levels 1-4 measured against the national qualifications framework. Holders of the level 3 qualification can work as communication support workers. Holders of the level 4 qualification can register as qualified interpreters.
- Through the TRS department I have considerable experience of work with mature students. See HEM101 Critical Evaluation of Teaching Observations?discussion under the heading of 'General Observations in relation to my Context and Practice'.

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