

DERBY COLLEGE FOR DEAF PEOPLE
Rob Rodgers

COMMUNICATION SUPPORT WORK TRAINING
IN THE 21ST CENTURY

Training for communication support workers has reached a crossroads. It does seem there is a growing feeling that we need to stop and take stock of where it's come from, and of which way it goes from here. For those of you not familiar with the history of the communication support worker please refer to Appendix One. The numbers of "communicators" seem to be insufficient for the ever-increasing demands of deaf learners. Anecdotal evidence still points to areas in the country where there are unqualified and inexperienced people trying to provide for deaf learners. The new Common Inspection Framework document poses a question for colleges, which can just as equally be posed towards the communication support work service.

I want to make it clear at the start that I am basing my thinking on many years of active involvement in the planning and delivery of communication support work training and slightly less years as a external verifier of the course. It must be stated that my views are not necessarily the views of my employers in either capacity. I will use the luxury of this forum to pose questions and more likely than not I won't answer them all.

How effective and efficient is the provision of education and training in meeting the needs of learners, and why? **(1)**

The question can be looked at from two different perspectives: that of the training and education of communication support workers and that of the deaf learner. For the purpose of this piece of work I will concentrate on the former. (though obviously the effectiveness and efficiency of the former impinges greatly on the latter).

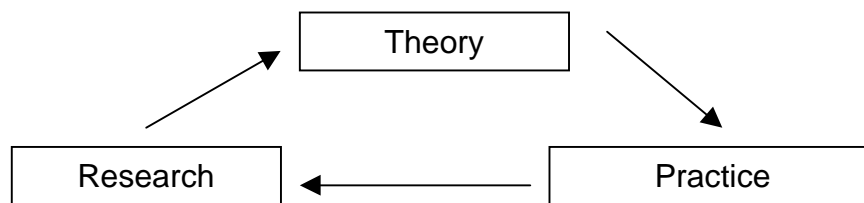
Has the training of CSWs enabled us as a body of practitioners to really develop a philosophy of life long learning for deaf learners? Concentrating on the post 16 sector have we developed a distinct kind of education in territory which is seen as different to school?

How well do Learners achieve? **(2)**

Tracey Kelsall quite rightly points out "Further Education 'shelters' students far too much – students find taking responsibility for their own learning, often when they are ill prepared, to be quite a shock" **(3)**

The revamping of training provision is welcome but how are such changes being informed? It is fair to say that the model that many other areas of

education benefit from is not the experience in the post 16 deaf education sector. Ideally there should be theorising about how deaf learners achieve informing our practice which leads into research and back into theory.



Let me use an example: there is theory being generated in some of our universities around bilingualism. This theorising should be informing our practice in the lecture room, the workshop or in the tutorial. As the theories are worked out in practice, research should be commissioned to report on findings of practitioners using bilingualism. This research would then clarify theories. I know this sounds very simplistic but the anecdotal experience I had with a deaf friend last week shows what a difference the circle could make. He has just completed teacher of the deaf training and confessed his own attitude to British Sign Language had changed completely after being exposed to the theoretical and research led input at a northern University.

Imagine the difference this could make to CSW training, if some of the excellent work coming out of the universities informed the delivery teams of course, being taken on board by practitioners and a feedback loop taking findings back into universities. Researchers now talk about the special way adults learn (andragogy) being different to the way children learn (pedagogy). We say that the deaf learner has a different way of learning to the hearing learner, but in what ways? Where does the trainee CSW go to find further information and read more about the issues around these ideas? Too often successive CSWs try to re-invent the wheel.

It is a sad reflection that the “Rise of the Communicator” is still the textbook in this area. It is still a very good book but the climate of education, the demands and many other areas have changed beyond recognition from that in which Chris Green and Warren Nickerson (who wrote the Rise of the Communicator) were working.

I have two examples of how changes can be debated and disseminated.

- At Derby College for Deaf People we are radically changing our web site and are hoping that we can generate a part of the site where practitioners will post papers. **(4)**
- The Lottery is offering funding for research, surely these must be centres who could work in partnership with others to put together an application. I particularly like the idea raised by Sue Dutton from the Association of Colleges, who says that more work could be done by colleges marketing their courses collectively in partnership. There could be economies of scale in considering arrangements at sub-regional level. **(5)**

If that advice is true for sector colleges and popular well subscribed courses, how much more relevant would it be for training for communicators? It is interesting that we can work collaboratively in many different areas of deaf education but there are few examples nationally of consortia offering the training. In an ideal world it would be interesting to see a model which involves a Higher Education Institution, a further education college, a deaf centre and a support service. I know the practicalities are complicated but, as I said at the start, I am posing questions.

Current changes in qualifications for communicators being driven by new demands from QCA will, if handled imaginatively provide a framework for continuous professional development. The finished article is not available yet but the proposals are for a common starting point for all communication support workers and deaf educational instructors. There would then be a whole range of units that could be added to the initial training or taken later as stand alone units.

An exciting prospect is the possibility of combining CSW units with other qualifications. So for example an NVQ level 3 in British Sign Language could be enhanced by taking a module on supporting deaf learners in a bilingual setting. Or an assessor award (the old D32/D33) could be enriched by taking a module on assessing the deaf learner. But to get the most out of these possibilities I feel we need to visit the idea of training consortia.

The major advantage I see in these changes is the possibility of developing the concept of on-going training. This is concern from many practitioners, some of whom feel having achieved the qualification, they have arrived at their destination. One of the things we try and instil on our course is that the qualification is the start of the journey. Continuous Professional Development is one of the buzz phrases in the Further Education sector at the moment. The Leeds team highlighted this need in their code of ethics for communication support workers, and said that

"The CSW should take advantage of any opportunities for professional development e.g. attending relevant in-service training sessions". **(6)**

I know that is not going to be easy for the isolated CSW within a college. But there are ways of updating and being involved in professional discussions without huge expense. There are electronic discussion groups that are available, web based information, watching television programmes. reading magazine, etc.

As a college we are seeking to introduce a Professional Development Programme for all full time staff. Perhaps at the very least the real professional needs to develop a critical friend who will offer guidance about ways to improve.

Organisations if they are to survive, need people who relish change, who take every opportunity to be creative and innovative, who actively seek responsibility. **(7)**

I am amazed at the number of opportunities there are within the FE sector at the moment. A lot of these opportunities can be utilised by communication support workers. If you are working as part of an FE establishment a lot of these are being funded by central government, for example the recent IT Learning Champions scheme.

Developmentally there need to be things happening at a national level. The CACDP Advisory group recommended that there needs to be more work done with organisations such as AoC, Learning and Skills Council, Learning and Skills Development Agency, FENTO. **(8)**. The clarity of the FENTO standards will inform training of future tutors in the FE Sector. I feel the work of the Edexcel qualification has been harder to do, because there are no clear definitions of what a CSW is. Furthermore the debate started by Frank Harrington in 1977 still feels like unfinished business **(9)**. The dialogue needs to be completed and the continuum of professionals more clearly defined. Until we, within the sector can agree and talk the same language we are not going to convince people outside the sector of deaf education. So the discussion needs to happen at a professional to professional level but also at a professional to consumer level.

It will be interesting to see what comes of the Learning and Skills Council's plan for independent researchers to conduct satisfaction surveys amongst students as customers **(10)**. Imagine the benefits of approaching deaf learners in such a way and allowing their views to inform training. A short questionnaire I undertook at a previous college revealed some of the concerns of deaf students. They were: -

- about the way they were treated
- about attitudes of communicators
- about being asked for signs
- about giving feedback **(11)**

There are just a few but I think the point is clear and the benefits are huge. Their concerns are all ones that can clearly be addressed in the training of communication support workers.

Having shown a draft of this paper to a colleague, Darran Askroft, he quite rightly pointed out that we need to address the lecturers' part of the learning relationship. How does the deaf Learner or the Communicator Support Worker influence the Lecturer? Anecdotal evidence exists as the various styles of influencing that have taken place over the years. There seems to be a continuum from the "beat the Lecturer into submission and compliance" to the passive "doormat" style of working.

The future of CSW Training needs to look at the professionalism of the CSW, equipping the trainee with skills of diplomacy, assertiveness, negotiating and empowering. We all have our own idea of what is acceptable professional behaviour for the CSW. But until we can convince the naïve lecturer of the rationale for communication support workers we are fighting a losing battle. The lecturer needs to see clearly why the deaf student's educational needs can't be met by the care worker or the learning facilitator. We have watered down the professionalism of supporting the deaf learner to a short deaf awareness session, at the end of which the lecturer has a few signs, can fingerspell, knows that lip-reading is hard but doesn't really have effective tools to work with the deaf learner.

If you have reached this part in the paper you must be congratulated! Think of ways the lecturer can be equipped. We would like to offer the following possible solutions, and would be very interested to hear your views and experiences.

Firstly, we need to clarify what it is lecturers need to know. Without being precious about our profession, what would make the job easier? What are the key principles in the application of the service we offer?

Secondly, how can this knowledge best be imparted? One example might be that the Edexcel course is developed to meet these needs. Imagine lecturers who have undertaken Deaf People and the Community, Support Strategies, Language and Communication and elements of professional practice. Imagine the IT lecturer who has done all of this and has completed the IT and deaf people module. What difference would it make if Learner Services staff did the Deaf People and the Community module? Do colleagues have examples of this happening? It would be a project worth discussing with local Learning and Skills Councils who have as part of their vision a desire to widen participation. The project would be for a rolling programme within institutions to promote Deaf Learner Champions. These people would be good links for support services and good advocates for deaf learners.

We need to look at communication support work training with new eyes and think through some of the implications of the changes that have been happening in wider further education sector. We look forward to your questions, observations, feed back but beg you to rise above indifference. This is a new era of opportunity: the communicator can go one of three ways, they can rise, they can plateau or they can fall.

What do you think?

Appendix one

A Brief History of the Communication Support Worker

Before the idea of Communication Support Workers (CSWs), deaf people were supported on training schemes and college courses by either teachers of the deaf (ToDs) or Social Workers with Deaf People (SWDPs).

During the 1980s, in Great Britain, the Manpower Services Commission (MSC) established and funded many training schemes with the overall aim of providing access to employment. This was in response to the mass unemployment of the era.

Some of the training was based in the workplace; however, Further Education Colleges (FE) increasingly provided the setting for training young people. The MSC offered an opportunity for deaf people to learn skills to gain employment; the problem was that there were not sufficient numbers of ToDs or SWDP to provide access to the training.

Consequently, the MSC had to provide training for CSWs to provide access for deaf people. In this way, the Communication Support Worker came into being.

The initial CSW courses were originally to be accredited by City and Guilds (C&G, an accreditation and examination organisation) although this proved problematic and eventually CSW courses were accredited by BTEC (Business and Technical Education Council). They are presently part of Edexcel (Excellence in Education) which merged BTEC and ULEAC (University of London Examinations and Assessment Council) in 1996.

Until June 1997, the qualification was called:

BTEC Continuing Education Certificate in Caring - Communication Support Work with Deaf People

And then became:

Edexcel Professional Development Award - Communication Support Workers with Deaf People from September 1997

And is currently:

Edexcel Professional Development Award - Communication Support Workers with Deaf Students from September 1998

Derby College for Deaf People (DCDP) has employed trained CSWs since 1990 and presently employs 45 CSWs. As an establishment, we now offer CSW training on campus.

The deaf students who attend DCDP access courses in local sector colleges where they are provided with comprehensive communication support. A team of CSWs is managed by a Co-ordinator based in each of the sector colleges.

References

1. The Common Inspection Framework. Adult Learning Inspectorate and Ofsted. 2001 p.6
2. Op Cit p.7
3. Talk magazine Summer 1999 – report on NDCS Further and Higher Education conference. p.16
4. See www.dcdp.org from June 2001 onwards. Times Educational Supplement. October 1988
5. Sue Dutton, acting Chief Executive of the Association of Colleges.
6. Code of Ethics, Laser beam Summer 1996 No.26 p.19
7. Derby Evening Telegraph 21 October 1998.
8. Recommendations regarding the future training qualifications and registration of communication support workers in Education. March 1999
9. Thoughts on the proposed establishment of a register of communication support workers. Frank Harrington October 1997.
10. FE focus. TES p.29
11. Student perceptions survey, Derby Tertiary College Wilmorton 1996.
12. Green, C. & Nickerson, W., (1992) *The Rise of the Communicator. A Perspective on Post-16 Education and Training for Deaf People*, Moonshine Books.