PRACTICE BRIEF
Supporting a University Student who is Deaf-blind in Writing for the Disciplines

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Abstract

Bhattacharyya (1997) finds that universities must scramble to accommodate students who are Deaf-blind "because of limited literature regarding post secondary education for Deaf-blind students and the fact they have not yet experienced serving this unique population." This Brief focuses on a supportive collaboration between an Academic Language and Learning (ALL) tutor, a B.A. student with Deaf-blindness, and her interpreter.

Literature Review

Not many people with Deaf-blindness have attended university to date, and the literature is sparse (Bhattacharya, 1997; Everson & Enos, 1995). However, there are some useful introductory articles informing prospective students and their supporters about the legal obligations of higher education institutions (Everson & Enos, 1995; Simon, 1999) and the kinds of assistance, equipment and accommodations available to students with a disability (Enos & Jordan, n.d.; Everson & Enos, 1995; Ingraham, Belanich, & Lascek, 1998; Pasupathy, 2006; Transition guide for students who are Deaf-blind, n.d.). There are also articles offering advice to university staff who support such students' efforts, emphasising the individual nature of each student's abilities, educational history, and accommodation needs, and the student's central role in establishing what is required to help them study without disadvantage (Bourquin, 1995; Spiers & Hammett, 1995; Talbot-Williams, 1996; Bhattacharya, 1997; Orlando, 1998; Jordan, 2001; Lago-Avery, 2001; Stodden & Conway, 2003).

Most published guidance is addressed to prospective students; to staff who teach the subjects in which students are enrolled; or to the disability officers who liaise with those teachers, with technicians who provide texts in accessible formats, with note-takers, with sign language interpreters, and with library staff who help students to source the readings assigned in their subjects.

Beyond the logistical arrangements and technical provisions that students with disabilities need, however, many Australian universities employ Academic Language and Learning (ALL) tutors whom any students may consult to develop their academic skills and in particular, their writing. The literature offers little guidance to students with Deaf-blindness, or to tutors, on how to make this work for students with a dual sensory impairment.

Problem

This needs to be addressed because, while universities may be experienced in supporting students who are blind or Deaf, the strategies staff have developed to work with either kind of student may not be helpful to a student with both conditions. For example, when working with a student who is Deaf, the tutor usually sits next to the student, poring over their draft together, making notes above and below the lines and in the margins, and writing questions on the back. To follow themes through a text, and facilitate restructuring of material, different ideas are highlighted in different colours. For a student who cannot see, however, any annotation must be electronic, so it can be accessed by Braille; leaving marginalia or colour coding of no use. Conversely, with a student who is blind, the tutor can read sections of their draft aloud, ask for clarification or amplification, and we can talk about the structural and language choices they have made and others that they might consider. Again,

this activity is not available when working with a student who is both Deaf and blind. Other methods are needed, and will be suggested in the remainder of this Brief.

Students and Location Information

Individual students have different combinations and severity of impairment to their sight and hearing, and will want to adapt any methods to their particular needs. The student with whom the ALL tutor evolved the methods here is a middle-aged woman whose sight was damaged by premature birth and whose hearing was limited, from early childhood, by ear infections and the growth of cholesteatoma. Over the course of her life, both sight and hearing have deteriorated, and as each diminished, she has sought opportunities to learn new methods of communication, until currently she uses tactile signing to converse (feeling, with her hands, as her interpreter signs Australian Sign Language: Auslan); and to read, she uses a refreshable Braille display attached to her computer keyboard.

Strategy

Because of the constraints outlined above, we separate the two main functions that a writing consultation usually carries out at one time. The first, which is central to the work of writing centres and ALL tutors, is to draw out the student's ideas about her writing assignments, the knowledge she has gained from lectures, tutorials, and readings in her subjects, and her plans for making her own arguments in light of these. We meet each week for this purpose with her interpreter, providing the student with an opportunity to work out her ideas orally, with a person who is experienced in the purposes, questions, structures, and language of academic enquiry, ahead of putting them in writing. Because the student and interpreter are using their hands throughout these sessions, the tutor takes notes of the discussion and, within a day or two, e-mails these to the student as a record of what we talked about. Although this approach is costly in terms of professionals' time, it is particularly important for a student who is Deaf-blind, because the usual opportunities to discuss assignments with peers are not available to her.

The second function of a writing consultation is to focus on the student's written text itself, and suggest ways in which it might be further developed, corrected, or otherwise improved. It is impractical to attempt this face-to-face, so the student and tutor e-mail drafts back and forth with annotations. Over time, we have developed a format for annotation which does not rely on vision at all, but is readily conveyed via Braille. Comments must immediately follow the word or sentence they apply to, they must be easily recognisable, and they must be as simple as possible. We use very few instruction words – "ADD, DELETE, CHANGE … TO…." – and all comments are in capital letters, enclosed in square brackets, to set them off from the student's own writing. For example:

> History inspired Deaf people to politicise sign language as a natural language and human right. Much in the same way that Indigenous rights have become more vocal, Deaf [ADD PEOPLE SEE IT AS ONE OF THEIR] human rights to resist dominant language invasion.

When the tutor wants to ask a question or make a suggestion, rather than a correction, she signals this by starting with the student's name. These comments may address the order of material, cohesive devices, clarification of unclear passages, inconsistent argument, or requests for further explanation or information. As well as alerting the student to repetitions, disjunctures, or errors which are difficult to track when composing and revising without vision, this exchange gives the student a sense of how a reader is apprehending and responding to her writing, so that over time she has developed skills in turning writer-centred drafts into reader-centred essays. (For a fuller account, see Chanock, 2010).

Observed Outcomes

The student's grades have risen from low passes to a range including Bs, and her confidence has developed to the point where she is now mentoring other students with disabilities. She has developed the habits of questioning needed to approach an essay (Why this question, in this context? What theory does it relate to, and how?), and she is engaging more closely, and more satisfyingly, with the intent of her assignments.

Implications

Because each student is different, and each discipline is also different, we are cautious about generalising very much from one student's experience. We think,

however, that it shows the usefulness, at least for students in humanities and social sciences, of establishing a regular time to explore assignments orally ahead of writing, and adoption of our system for commenting on written work might save others a good deal of the trial and error involved in our developing it.

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