



Leonardo da Vinci

Bridging the Gap

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This paper outlines the United Kingdom component of the MÁs programme, an on-line preparation programme for deaf and disabled people, “Preparing for Study”. De Montfort University is the lead partner in the UK, the secondary partner is the University of Bristol and the social partner is Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living. The development of the programme is discussed, with particular reference to collaborative relationships and the development of an “inclusive” process. Direct testimony from deaf people is presented, to illustrate the gaps in educational provision and highlight issues for development.

The “Preparing for Study” Programme

The Preparing for Study programme is being developed as an on-line programme that it is fully accessible to deaf and disabled students. Instead of adapting a currently available programme to make it accessible, or developing a programme specifically for deaf and/or disabled students, this will be a programme designed to meet the needs of deaf and disabled students that will be open to all students. The UK Project Team reached these decisions based upon research undertaken at Bristol University & De Montfort University, and the work undertaken by project team members as part of the first phase of this project. (see Taylor, G. 2001 for further information)

Aims of the UK Programme

- To develop a preparation programme to help deaf students to participate in training, education and employment opportunities, and to evaluate its national and transnational application
- To investigate and develop online teaching of such a programme, to widen access to training for deaf people
- To report on issues about the transnational application of the programme and the delivery mechanism

The new “Preparing for Study” programme will be delivered on-line, and comprises two elements; the Foundation Studies in Social Work Module, and the Key Skills Module.

The Introduction to Social Work Module

What do social workers do?

Qualifications and training courses

Helping people, giving advice and improving lives
Providing services to diverse communities
Being a social work student, teaching and learning

The Key Skills Module

Communication
Application of number
Information technology
Working with others
Improving own learning

Programme Delivery

The delivery of social work and social care programmes on-line is, at the time of writing, underdeveloped in the UK. There are some on-line programmes which deliver social work related content as part of a mixed-mode approach, which also includes distance-learning as well as classroom based materials. But there are no accredited social work programmes in the UK which rely entirely upon an on-line delivery mode. Those social work programmes using some form of on-line delivery usually employ the internet as a means of supplying source and reference materials to students, in support of classroom-based teaching sessions, rather than as an interactive medium where students can gain some feedback from their endeavours and undertake some form of self-assessment.

Furthermore, such programmes are generally first year undergraduate programmes rather than the pre-undergraduate (or preparation) level that is the focus of the M^AS project. It was therefore decided by the UK partners group that the project would be best served by the development of a new Introduction to Social Work module for the M^AS project.

This means that content can be specifically designed as inclusive from the outset rather than adapt already existing material. This is important given current re-formulation of social work education in the UK. Whilst the structure of new social work training has been outlined by the government, the exact nature of the content is still being debated. In designing our own module 'from the ground up', we will be able to incorporate these, and future, changes more quickly than if we used a third party programme. Furthermore, such a module can be designed using the DMU template for module development and will therefore be consistent with the structure of other DMU modules. One of the central principles of this phase of the M^AS project, as a direct result of the work undertaken in phase one of the project, is that it is essential to embed any new development as deeply as possible in the mainstream activity of the institution, in order to protect it from being seen simply as a "special project" (and therefore optional), and to instil a sense of ownership in the staff responsible for delivery.

The majority of on-line "study skills" programmes in the UK are an adapted version of the National Key Skills Framework. This is an initiative heavily promoted by the British government as a means of co-ordinating and measuring the development of study skills across all levels of education. Universities are encouraged, but not compelled, to become part of the scheme. They are then permitted to adapt the materials and framework for local use, or use the already developed content as part of a nationally accredited system for teaching and assessment. De Montfort University has chosen to offer an adapted programme to suit local need and fit within the university diet of programmes.

Study skills programmes that are designed specifically for deaf students are few and far between. They are mostly offered by colleges of further education that have a particular focus on deaf students, and the on-line component is generally supplementary material to support classroom based teaching. Of particular interest to the MÁS project is the work being undertaken on study skills by Derby College for Deaf People (DCDP). DCDP have a long-standing experience of providing further education programmes to deaf students, and a developing expertise in study skills strategies. DCDP are associate members of the MÁS UK project team and are part of the development of the MÁS project. A comparison between specifically targeted classroom based programmes, and those with a more generic focus, such as the National Key Skills Framework with its firmly established place in the higher education sector, should enable us to develop an effective approach that offers mainstream availability, but is sufficiently adaptable to be consistent with the principles and methodological approach of the MÁS project. For this reason the MÁS UK project team decided to use the National Key Skills Framework as the Key Skills module during the pilot stage.

Working in Collaboration

“We learn, when we respect the dignity of the people, that they cannot be denied the elementary right to participate fully in the solutions to their own problems. Self – respect arises only out of people who play an active role in solving their own crises and who are not helpless, passive, puppet-like recipients of private or public services. To give people help, while denying them a significant part in the action, contributes nothing to the development of the individual. In the deepest sense, it is not giving but taking – taking their dignity. Denial of opportunity for participation is the denial of human dignity and democracy. It will not work’. (Alinsky, 1971)

An essential building block of the MÁS project is “inclusion”, and the collaborative process. The ethos for any effective partnership is one in which the contribution of all partners is valued and sought. The MÁS programme provides a real challenge and an opportunity for different organisations to meet and work together. To acknowledge the extra commitment that is needed in learning, of finding new methods and styles of approach that need to be addressed in forming effective tools for delivery.

In developing the programme in the UK many areas have been explored and sometimes it has been necessary to go over the same ground on more than one occasion. The challenge is particularly difficult as our approach seeks to address issues as they relate to Deaf and disabled people, often a site of vigorous debate in the Deaf community. The common theme of providing learning through an on-line programme will inevitably raise new and so far unexpected or unexplored challenges and it will require considerable commitment to achieve the desired goal. The inclusion of the Leicestershire Centre for Integrated Living the UK partnership brings into play the key issues of the Social Model of Disability and the experience and knowledge of Disability Equality Trainers.

Major Developments

A key change which has taken place within the United Kingdom since the start of this programme is the introduction of new legislation in relation to education. Although the UK has had the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) 1995 on its statute books for a number of years the impact on education had previously been very limited. From September 2002 the Governing Body has legal liability for ensuring that higher education institutions comply with the new requirements of the DDA. The DDA refers to the Governing Body as the

“responsible body”. The responsible body is legally liable for the actions of the institution as a whole, but also for:

- The actions of individual employees of the institution in the course of their employment, whether they are full-time, part-time or temporary.
- The actions of agents, including contractors, visiting speakers etc.

Discrimination against disabled applicants or students can take place in either of two ways. By:

- Treating them less favourably than other people
- Failing to make reasonable adjustments when they are placed at a substantial disadvantage compared to other people for a reason relating to their disability

The Act applies to all the activities institutions undertake wholly or mainly for students, including “e-learning” – the main focus of the work being developed within this programme. This will certainly address the written content of the module, but to be fully effective the programme will need to reflect and make recommendations on other changes that will be required. Inevitably issues relating to advertising and encouraging people to attend the programme, ensuring appropriate software and hardware is readily accessible, and that other areas of support are catered for will need to be addressed. As we can see from the new requirements of the Disability Discrimination Act, this will be a responsibility for which all Higher Education institutions will need to cater. The UK module, within the new legislative framework, will truly seek to ‘Bridge the Gap’

Identifying the Gaps

In order to illustrate the gaps in provision, and how they are being bridged, we will draw upon the direct testimony of deaf people themselves, by using material collected for a book (*Deaf Identities*) that was written in close association with the MÁS project. These commentaries are crucial, because the primacy of the experience of deaf and disabled people as a platform for project development is central to the development of the MÁS project.

One of the writers for the book from Germany reports that deaf people in the former German Democratic Republic (GDR) used to say that those in the West have everything, but know much less....

”Today we know that neither the East or the West provide an adequate school system for deaf people and this is due in the main to the over-reliance and overemphasis of lip-reading and speaking skills which has meant that forms of education delivered in Deaf people’s natural language, sign language, have not been developed”.

This is important when we come to consider university entrance as, denied access to adequate schooling few Deaf people have the necessary pre-requisites to obtain the necessary entrance qualifications, the "Abitur" in Germany, although they have the potential of their hearing peers. There is also another reason that Deaf people have not attended university and that is a psychological reason. This German Deaf person tells us that she had two teachers who were themselves deaf. She describes how the children were always glad to be with those teachers as communication with them was relaxed and informative.

“We kept, of course, asking him how he, as a deaf person, had managed to become a teacher. He told us that he was an exception and that we should simply accept the fact that deaf people

in general could not become teachers....our hearing teachers would say: 'You cannot hear, how can you communicate with hearing people or use the telephone, it is simply impossible. You are deaf, and it is a fact that there is only a limited choice of professions suitable for you'."

"Everyone in my family went to university to study, so why not me, too?"

She was able to attend university by participation in the PotsMods-Project at the Fachhochschule, Potsdam, which, like other initiatives internationally, arose through the debates being conducted about sign language, the increased linguistic understanding and status of sign language, and a notion of equality enforced by legislation.

In the UK more young Deaf people are going to university, although in numbers proportionately less than their hearing peers. There are several reasons for the increase in Deaf students: there is more access to information, Deaf young people themselves have more confidence and are more determined to go to university. They can access university because there is an interpreting service and support in terms of notetakers, although as these are new professions there is a great deal of work to be done in terms of developing appropriate standards of support.

What are the "gaps" that confront deaf people who come to university following a successful oral education? And, are the barriers similar to those that confront sign language users? Many deaf people who reach university highlight three areas:-

- First that the strategies they used at school no longer work when classrooms contain 40 or 80 people who have no experience of deafness, when the taking of notes becomes essential and when there are very rapid debates with a great deal of student participation. Deaf students have to be assertive in their demands to receive complete information, including access to videos.

A Spanish writer for *Deaf Identities* records:-

"I remember the first day of class as if it were yesterday: What could I do? I told all of my teachers about my limitation so that it would be taken into account. I sat in the front row and tried to follow the teachers' lectures solely by lip reading. To begin with I copied the notes of a classmate that sat next to me, but after a while I got the feeling that it bothered him, and also a lot of the time I couldn't understand his handwriting. Because of this I stopped taking notes and decided to ask classmates at the end of lectures for their notes to photocopy and take home with me to study.

I limited myself to copying the notes the lecturers made on the blackboard. I was never absent from class and I tried to follow and understand the teacher's explanations, raising queries both in class and in tutorials. Despite my efforts with lip reading it was inevitable that I would lose a lot of information in the theoretical classes, although how much information I lost depended on the style and consideration of the teacher I was with....If overhead transparencies were used and the lights were turned off to see them better I could no longer follow the lecturer. I was left uninformed with video documentaries or videos about experimental procedures for laboratory practical. Obviously, none of the videos carried subtitles. In lectures, when classmates asked questions or had debates I lost all the information because I was sat in the front row. The same thing happened when the lecturer

walked down the aisle whilst speaking. This posed no problem for my hearing classmates, but for a person like me with a hearing loss, very normal behaviour during a university lecture can turn into a huge communication barrier.

Unfortunately, preparation for most of the exams meant studying the lecture notes. Therefore, especially during the first year, I referenced bibliographies and the books mentioned by lecturers at the beginning of the class. This was the only way for me to continue with my studies. I knew that I was losing a lot of time by writing the notes out again, summarising them and then drawing diagrams of the information I found in books, but in the end it was worth the effort, even if I had to try twice as hard as my classmates. “

- The second frequent comment from oral deaf people is that there is a need for an assessment from support services, to ascertain what assistance might be gained from technology such as FM transmitters, and also guidance on study skills, for example; through access to the Internet.
- Thirdly, is the importance of contact with people who are sign language users. Often, deaf people who have been through oral education have had no awareness of sign language, or have been raised to think that it is terrible, a second class option only to be used in a situation of failure. By denying access to sign language, deaf people are often also denied access to deaf peers and to positive role models. Once they can establish these relationships it is possible for them to move away from seeing deafness as a limitation, as a problem that disadvantages them, and to begin the process of constructing a positive identity.

Another Spanish writer raises some issues which also have a resonance for the UK experience:

“For a child like myself that had already acquired oral language, it was difficult to come into contact with other deaf people that I was yearning to meet.....the biggest problem was not having other people like myself, feeling different and not being able to understand a lot of things. I was constantly around hearing children, I played with them, communicated with them more or less, but something was missing from inside of me.....my need to meet other deaf people, to find a place in this world where I would feel secure and be amongst equals, remained inside of me. To begin with I didn't know how to read my feelings....

Deaf leaders gave names to my feelings: Deaf Community, Culture, Identity, Sign Language, SL Interpreters: that was when I wholly understood the conflicts that flowed through me when I began to have contact with deaf people....

I understood that education is essential for my growth as a person. It was important to show other young deaf people that we can achieve more so they are able to develop a spirit of transcendence, of professional fulfilment. You have to overcome the barriers you face in education with a tremendous effort, an effort that many allow abandon them, and that is why I wanted to show and prove to myself that I was capable of achieving it, that the stigma of having limitations was something fabricated, that wasn't adjusted the reality of deaf people.

It's true that the benefit of having a good level of reading and writing has helped me in achieving this goal, but above all, it was the fact of having discovered myself as a deaf person, the fact of being able to tell my colleagues to repeat something because I didn't understand it, the fact of speaking to the teaching staff and negotiating my needs as a deaf student. Some responded adequately, others ignored my requests, but in general it was positive. It's been like this for many other deaf people that haven't been able to or allowed to discover their vocation and their abilities."

Conclusion

We cannot change the world, unfortunately. A revolution in the education of deaf children is needed, but is unlikely to happen. What we can do is attempt to address the lack of a system of bilingual education, and build on the strengths and abilities of deaf children, by offering a programme which aims to maximise opportunities to achieve a university degree and professional qualification that is not only studied by deaf and disabled people, but is available as a mainstream university programme. Surely, what is good for Deaf and disabled people is good for everyone?

The M^ÁS programme in the UK aims to use the technology afforded by the Internet and computer-based software, to move Deaf students from the periphery of higher education, from a position of being marginalised and excluded, working in a language that is not natural to them, where their individual needs have to be negotiated or demanded or repetitively requested and are often ignored, to a position where their needs are acknowledged and held central by the provision of a programme to which both disabled and non-disabled students are given access. The programme aims to establish a disability perspective as the starting point, rather than, as has been the experience of disabled people, an afterthought. We strive to do this by working as a partnership; the Universities, the Centre for Integrated Living, community organisations, the support services, and deaf, disabled and non-disabled staff and potential students.

And the benefits to society as a whole? A more accessible, mainstream programme in which Deaf, disabled and non-disabled students are treated as equal no matter their individual disadvantage. And, a programme which eventually provides the community with deaf and hearing professionals who have wider perspectives and broader experiences.

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