Understanding the Impact of Deafness

Teaching Students in VET who have a Hearing Loss

FAQs for Teachers
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Understanding the impact of deafness

Q. There are many variations of deafness, but are there any common experiences among people with a hearing loss?

A. One common factor with deafness is the way it impedes access to information and communication. Another is the fact that deafness is invisible. These two factors create an environment where deafness and deaf people are often misunderstood by others.

Hearing people are unaware of the amount of extraneous information they absorb. This happens unconsciously and effortlessly as we go about our day-to-day lives. We overhear conversations in public, catch snippets of information from a radio or TV playing in the background and so forth. While we may not be aware of it, we know a great deal because of our capacity to tune in and out of the cacophony of information that happens around us each day.

A person with significant deafness misses out on all or part of this bombardment of information. That may sound like a good thing. But the reality for a person with a hearing loss is that at least some of the time, crucial pieces of information are missing. For someone with early life deafness, these gaps can present significant barriers, especially when undertaking a course of study.

Q. What does early life deafness mean?

A. It means someone who has had a hearing loss either since birth or who experienced a hearing loss before the age of three or four. They are usually described as pre-lingually deaf. This means their deafness occurred before the development of language.

Q. What difference does this make?

A. It makes a big difference, especially if the child has hearing parents, which about 90 per cent do. One of the major impacts of early life deafness is the way it affects how the child learns language and discovers the world around them. For a hearing child, this happens effortlessly in an unconscious and unstructured way by listening to and copying the language they hear around them.

A child with a significant hearing loss will need to be consciously taught not only language, but also about aspects of the world around them (for example, some things make noise while others do not). For some, developing native-like fluency in English can be a significant challenge.

Q. What are the long-term implications of this?

A. This can have a number of effects though they will vary from person to person. One of the most common is the impact on English literacy skills. Without day-to-day access to English, the challenge to develop literacy is enormous. For many deaf people it’s a life-long challenge and few achieve native-like fluency. Many achieve sufficient literacy skills to successfully interact in the world but some are unable to gain literacy skills beyond early primary level. None of this is a reflection on the deaf person’s intelligence or ability to learn. Rather, it is an indication of how difficult a task it is to learn the written form of a language when a person has little or no access to its spoken form.
Q. Where can I find more information about teaching deaf and hard of hearing students?

A. There are a number of brochures in this FAQ series that you may find helpful (e.g. working with interpreters and notetakers or specific classroom environments). There is also a wealth of information on the Centre of Excellence website. Go to www.nmit.edu.au/excellence and follow the link that says “Information for Teachers in VET”.

Alternatively you can contact us at the Centre of Excellence to discuss concerns or queries. We provide a state-wide service to the VET sector aimed at providing information to enhance the participation and learning experience of deaf students. We are happy to answer questions by telephone or email or we can visit your institute to provide coaching and advice to teaching staff.

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