

July 1998

# Chapter 16: Communicating with people with disabilities

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## Recommended Citation

Power, Mary R., "Chapter 16: Communicating with people with disabilities" (1998). *Working Through Communication*. Paper 17. [http://epublications.bond.edu.au/working\\_through\\_communication/17](http://epublications.bond.edu.au/working_through_communication/17)

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## CHAPTER 16: COMMUNICATING WITH PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES

### Introduction:

One in seven Australians will have a disability at some time in their lives. Disability is generally a condition of old age, with 90% of people over 65 having some kind of disability. Disabilities can be mild to profound, with varying degrees of effect upon the ability to communicate. Knowledge of the needs of people with disabilities can make communication with them easier and more comfortable. Knowing what to do can give you confidence so that you can respond unselfconsciously to the other person and can help facilitate communication. A university education should make you a skilled communicator who is comfortable with a range of ways of communicating with people of differing backgrounds.

### Issues

People with disabilities include those who are hearing impaired, vision impaired, intellectually impaired, physically impaired or have learning disorders or psychiatric disorders. People with disabilities should expect to be communicated with as much respect as any other person. Ignorance about disabilities or embarrassment lead to problems in communication.

### Discussion exercises

Contact the local deaf society and ask if they can arrange (for a fee) a simulation exercise called “Deaf, Deaf World” for your group. Discuss the feelings the simulation arouses and the insights it give into different modes of communication under difficult circumstances.

### Quotable quote discussion

“Deafness is the loneliest country in the world. The profoundly deaf are cut off from normal intimacies. The deaf cannot hear the whispered asides that brighten a dull gathering; they cannot hear a chuckle, a whimper, the almost subliminal sounds that tell us automatically and without thought what people are thinking and feeling; they cannot hear a sigh, breath blown through the lips in irritation, a tapping foot, a drumming finger, the thickened voice that says someone has a cold, the clicking fingers that say something has been misplaced, the whistling or humming that says someone is pleased with the work they are doing. People do not confide in the deaf because confidences call for quiet voices, people do not make jokes to the deaf, because jokes lose all point if they have to be repeated. Because communication with the profoundly deaf is so difficult, people communicate only *facts*, not feelings. so deafness becomes the loneliest place in the world.” (Jefferis, B.) Three of a kind. ch 14).

1. What feeling are you experiencing as you read this piece?
2. Jefferis lists some sound-based non-verbal communicators. Would any of these be particular to her own culture and not as important in your culture? (Remember that culture can be youth-based as well as region or country-based.)
3. How do you think a deaf person would feel about the view that Jefferis is expressing?
4. Ask a deaf person for their reaction to this quotation and discuss their response with the class.

### Team task

In groups of three research facilities available for people with disabilities in your university, town, suburb or city. Conduct interviews and library research. Write a formal report, give a presentation of your report to your class.

### Individual tasks

Interview a blind or deaf student on your campus about how they would like their worlds to change to suit their needs. Write a short report on the needs of either group based on your interview and further reading in the area.

## Writing tasks

Paragraph—using the format on p. 69 :

Sitting next to me in my communication tutorial was Fred whose other disability (besides being called Fred) was that he was blind. But his disability wasn't a handicap .....

## Speech opportunities

**Give a 6 minute talk on one of the following topics**

*Why people talk to the interpreter instead of the deaf person*

*Why people pat my dog but ignore me*

*Why people talk to the person pushing my wheelchair as if I can't hear*

*Why we should all learn sign language*

## Presentation

Use the information below to construct a six minute presentation persuading employees that they can learn to communicate with the intellectually impaired person you have just hired to work in your company.

*Effective Communication with people with intellectual impairment*, taken from Stephens, M., Power, D. & Hyde, D. (1991) *Accessibility Kit*. Brisbane: Griffith University (used with permission)

- Show respect for the person always
- Use the same tone of voice and eye contact that you would for any other person
- Use simple words and simple sentences
- Break down tasks or information into the smallest possible number of simple steps, as needed by the person
- Identify cues in each step which will help the person to progress to the next step
- Consider whether learning might be assisted by teaching the steps backwards from the end result
- Demonstrate each step wherever possible
- Practise each step with the person, "say and do", where appropriate
- Repeat the practice and/or information until mastery of this step is achieved
- Have the person *show* he or she has achieved mastery of the information or skill
- Communicate, demonstrate, practise and check each step of the information or task with the person until the whole is understood
- Accept that the person may need you to communicate the same information or skill again in the near future
- Repeat the communication/practice process as often as is required with the same patience and respect
- Develop communication aids which help people access needed information or skills. These could include colour coding, numbering displays, minimal wording, templates and special forms
- Where print is used, use slightly larger print size

## Discussion

*What would you do if . . . . ?*

1. A person with a severe speech impairment approaches you seeking some information. You find it difficult to make out what she has said.
2. You have been talking with a deaf person through an interpreter. You now want to talk to the interpreter. However, the interpreter continues to sign what you are saying and ignores your request that she stop signing to the deaf person.

## **Journals**

Reflect on your experiences in gaining knowledge in this area.

## **Sources of information**

(Information to help you answer these questions is available in Stephens, M., Power, D., & Hyde, M. (1991). *Accessibility Kit*. Brisbane: Griffith University; a copy of which is held by most University and TAFE libraries or resource centres) .