

Promoting Communication Between Deaf and Hearing Students in the Classroom

One of the unique challenges that a R.I.T professor faces is integrating deaf students in a predominately hearing classroom. With deaf students in the class a professor must adapt to interpreters, C-cap specialists, and a whole new culture in their classroom. One area that many professors overlook is how you can promote interaction between deaf and hearing students in order to strengthen the learning community for all within your classroom. This makes the learning environment more comfortable for the professor, the deaf students, as well as the hearing students.

Recent studies have emphasized that deep meaningful learning derives from discussion that is associated with problem solving, conceptual organization, and collaborative activity. This type of active learning is often group work based. It depends on hearing and deaf students working together. However, with the language barrier and a fear of the unknown, many deaf and hearing students do not interact with each other. This breaks down the strength of the learning community in your classroom. Therefore, it is important for professors to learn strategies to help promote interaction, communication, and participation from hearing and deaf students alike.

The first step to creating a positive learning environment is to set the tone. The professor must initiate contact with deaf students, setting an example for the hearing students that they can communicate with someone that speaks another language. Studies have shown that hearing students model their attitudes about deaf students from the professor's example (Liu & Stinson, 1999). A professor can set a positive example by speaking directly with the deaf student in front of the class. This can be achieved by learning simple finger spelling of your name or learning a few introductory signs such as, "good morning" or "how are you?". Simple "survival signs" can be learned quickly

through the *Class Act website* provided by NTID at, <http://www.rit.edu/ntid/drt/classact/>.

If a professor is unprepared for deaf students in the classroom, they can also create a more comfortable environment by writing back and forth with the student or even asking them to teach them how to spell their name or common signs.

The second step is to make sure your classroom is a comfortable environment and conducive to learning for deaf students. It is the professor's responsibility to be sure the classroom is arranged in a way that the deaf students can see the interpreter or captionist at all times. Other deaf students may be dependant on lip reading and need to be seated where they can watch the instructor clearly. Also, it is important to be sure that the lighting levels are acceptable. It is important to keep in mind that if the professor turns off all the lights to project an image, the deaf students may no longer be able to see the sign language or captions. At the same time, the professor should guide the interpreter to stand or sit in a location that does not block a hearing student from being able to appreciate the lecture visuals as well.

Thirdly, the professor should be conscious of the noise level in the room. Many deaf students have residual hearing that impairs them from distinguishing between background noise and actual classroom instruction. Professors should do their best to eliminate machine noise and students chatter that may detract form the classroom environment. A quiet classroom helps both hearing and deaf students concentrate.

Once the classroom's physical environment is established, the professor still faces many obstacles of how to get deaf and hearing students to communicate. It is especially isolating for deaf students if they are the only one in the classroom without any deaf peers. They have a tendency to withdraw, no longer ask questions, or ask for feedback from classmates. This lack of communication and collaboration takes away from the student's ability to grow and learn. One way for a professor to encourage interaction of deaf and hearing students is to arrange group work that mixes deaf and hearing students

together. This is often more successful if all students are provided with some basic guidelines of how to conduct group work. These guidelines can be provided to students in the form of a handout. There is a template provided by Class Act at, <http://www.rit.edu/ntid/drt/classact/environment/groupwork.html>. The primary guidelines include; being sure all students have a direct line of sight with each other and the interpreter, only one student should speak at a time, students should raise their hand when they want to contribute an idea, notes should be recorded by hand or computer to communicate if interpreting services are not available and to create a summary to refer back to. If students are expected to meet in groups outside of class time, they should be encouraged to schedule meeting ahead of time so interpreting services can be requested.

When a deaf student rarely participates in class discussions, it often gives hearing students the impression that they do not have ideas to contribute or are not as capable. In a research study completed, “A focus group member commented that when a D/HH student did not hear what a hearing student said and did not respond, the hearing student interpreted this as an indication that the D/HH student was stupid (Liu & Stinson, 1999).” This is often a misconception that occurs due to the professor not providing enough time for deaf students to process the information or questions prior to calling on students for a response. Due to the lag of time from interpreting or captioning, a deaf student is always a few seconds behind where the hearing students are in the instruction. If a professor gives all students more time to process information prior to calling on a student, it will give deaf students a more equal opportunity to participate and demonstrate to hearing students they are as capable as them. When hearing students and deaf students respect each other and their talents, they are more likely to initiate communication. Additionally, “A communication free-for-all will not work with deaf and hard-of-hearing students; it will limit their participation in classroom activities (Class Act).” Encourage all students to raise their hand and leave them up long enough for deaf students to identify who is

speaking. This will also prevent multiple students from speaking at once, which is impossible for an interpreter to translate clearly.

Lastly, both hearing and deaf students need to get over the fear of communicating. This can be overcome by educating the hearing students about deaf culture. If a professor is not well versed in the subject, they should bring in teachers of the deaf or provide reading assignments that could help explain deafness better and the struggles students face. Professors can also encourage the interpreters to participate and help the class learn basic sign language and techniques. This would help students break down communication barriers. Studies demonstrated that, "...hearing students who have some knowledge about deafness tend to be more accepting and are better able to help repair communication breakdown if the D/HH student misunderstands (Stinson & Liu, 1999)".

In summary, promoting interaction in a classroom of deaf and hearing students falls to the classroom professor. The professor must set the tone through their attitude, arrange the physical environment so all can benefit from it, set guidelines for group communication, and educate their students on deafness. It may require additional planning and consideration on the part of the professor to create a successful environment for deaf and hearing students; however it can lead to a more rewarding teaching experience and stronger learning environment.

**TEN TIPS to promote communication in a your classroom**  
**between deaf and hearing students**

- 1.) Demonstrate and promote a positive attitude – the professor should set the tone for the class
- 2.) Arrange your classroom so it is conducive for learning – deaf students need to clearly see the interpreter, captionist, projection screen, or instructor’s lips
- 3.) Reduce excess noise in the class as much as possible to prevent distractions
- 4.) Allow students enough time to process information – speak slowly, pause between concepts, give students a chance to read handouts before discussing
- 5.) Pause after you ask a question before calling on a student – gives deaf students time to catch up and process information since the interpreter or captionist causes a lag. When deaf students are able to participate they prove to hearing students they are equally capable.
- 6.) Create effective small group learning communities - mix hearing and deaf students together and set guidelines such as hand raising, scheduling, and note taking
- 7.) Collaborate with teachers of the deaf and interpreters to educate the class about deafness – increased understanding leads to better tolerance and reduced fear
- 8.) Learn “survival signs” – they will help you and the students communicate if interpreting services are not available and demonstrates and interest in the deaf student (<http://www.rit.edu/ntid/drt/classact/tools/survivalsigns.html>)
- 9.) Have patience – it takes time to break down barriers and create a comfortable environment that operates smoothly
- 10.) Be familiar with characteristics of deaf students so you can be comfortable interacting with them and sets a positive example for others

## Bibliography

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