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People with learning disabilities teaching others

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The project to involve service users in teaching speech and language therapy students was set up in collaboration with a central London partnership and the speech and language therapist involved in the service in 2005. It was set up to strengthen disability awareness and increase positive perceptions of disability. First year undergraduate speech and language therapy students were the first to participate.

A group of six people with learning disabilities provided the training.

- ▶ Four people gave a training session about service users interviewing staff to be key workers. They used a range of communication methods including speech, Makaton signs, symbols and gesture.

- ▶ One man used Makaton, speech and symbols to teach the students about his work experience.
- ▶ Another man, who did not use speech to communicate, gave a session using video in collaboration with his support worker on the important aspects of his daily routine.

Key points

- ▶ Teaching led by people with learning disabilities using their own preferred communication style has many benefits for both service users and students.
- ▶ Service users gain confidence in using their own way of communicating and develop increased self-esteem.
- ▶ Students become more aware of the needs, aspirations and communication abilities of people with learning disabilities.

'I had no idea about what we were going to listen to today. I thought it would be basic. It wasn't, and I have been given a lot more to think about. I'd really like a placement with adults with learning disability.'



Before these sessions, students were given information on the range of communication they might expect and explored the types of questions that would be appropriate to ask the trainers. Levels of language complexity and supports such as natural gesture and Makaton signs were also discussed. Students had a practical session on Makaton signing.

Students were asked to fill in a questionnaire after the training sessions. This had rating scales as well as questions that prompted students to reflect on the experience and make comments. Service users were asked informally about their experiences after the teaching.

What the students said

The students rated the training highly. Six of them stressed that they gained much from hearing the service users' points of view.

- ▶ *'Realising how important feeling useful is for these people, and having choice.'*
- ▶ *'To see the communication needs from the point of view of a person with a disability: also, what they want from a co-worker and employment.'*
- ▶ *'I have learnt to see the needs of the service from a service user's point of view.'*
- ▶ *'It's helped me to realise the range of people I may work with.'*
- ▶ *'It has given me a lot more confidence of how to react.'*

The students' comments revealed a range of insights they had gained from the training.

- ▶ *'[the sessions] allowed them to maximise the capabilities they have.'*
- ▶ *'It has been interesting to see what is on offer for adults with learning disabilities.'*
- ▶ *'...appreciating the repetition of things, eg. watching videos or photos many times so the clients feel comfortable.'*

- ▶ *'It has given me insight into what life is like for adults with learning disabilities and what they like doing during their everyday lives.'*

The students were asked what other training they would like from adults with learning disabilities. Again, there was a variety of responses. Seven students felt they would benefit from further training on how to communicate more effectively with this group.

- ▶ *'Showing us how they communicate and what helps them to get their message across.'*
- ▶ *'I would like to learn more about communicating with adults with learning disabilities, eg. more Makaton training.'*
- ▶ *'...how to respond naturally... without any offence.'*

'I thought the first presentation was great because not everyone could talk. The non-verbal group member was supported to put her view across by gesture and photo support. I was very impressed.'

The students also mentioned some other issues they'd like to know more about.

- ▶ *'...more about their experiences in the community and within the services.'*
- ▶ *'I would like to know more about what adults with learning disabilities would like to gain from speech and language therapy input.'*
- ▶ *'I would like to take part in a training context where I can watch and see how the service users develop their communication skills and confidence over time.'*

What the trainers felt

It was clear from our informal discussions with service users that they had benefited from providing the training. Their confidence and self-esteem increased. They were proud of what they had done and had a sense of ownership about the way they did the work.

It had also given them a special and meaningful role that was beyond their usual daily living experiences.

It would have been useful to involve the service users in a more formal evaluation. This may well have given us more in-depth knowledge of their views on how the session



went, the effect it had on their communication skills, and their opinions on what should be included in future training for the students.

Conclusion

This work shows that when people with learning disabilities are given the opportunity to speak about topics that mean a lot to them they are able to convey strong messages. This was clearly reflected in the students' comments.

- ▶ 'I did not expect the service users to be able to pass on such a strong message to us as

a group about what was important to them. Their level of skill really surprised me.'

- ▶ 'I had no idea about what we were going to listen to today. I thought it would be basic. It wasn't, and I have been given a lot more to think about. I'd really like a placement with adults with a learning disability.'
- ▶ 'I thought the first presentation was great because not everyone could talk. The non-verbal group member was supported to put her view across by gesture and photo support. I was very impressed.'
- ▶ 'I thought that having the Makaton training was a great support for us. I'd like to do more. I also found it good to have the talk about the kinds of questions we should try and ask. I hadn't thought of how I would make my language simpler. It was a real challenge for me.'

Given that none of the students had any previous sustained contact or work experience with people with learning disabilities, the training had provided vital awakening in their general understanding of people with learning disabilities, coupled with increased awareness of the social and environmental implications of communication disability and the barriers to successful communication. However, it did raise a number of issues about how little the students on this course knew about a group they may well decide to work with once they graduate.

All the students appreciated the benefit of the training to them as developing practitioners. Many wanted to learn more about useful communication strategies. Some had not really considered how they might need to modify their language – for example, what words to use and how comments are phrased – and had found this a challenge. It was felt that such issues should be taken forward more purposefully in clinical tutorials where there is opportunity to explore issues in a 'safe' and confidential environment.

The project is now in its third phase. Besides people with learning disabilities it has included, as trainers, people with a range of other speech and communication disabilities and parents of children with complex learning and communication needs. The work is ongoing and each year continues to develop. ■

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