

Listening and learning from the unheard: Interprofessional learning and people with learning disabilities who are non-verbal communicators.

Interim report – December 2011

Author: Stef Lunn

This progress report returns to the origins of this evaluative teaching exercise, using the 'Expression of Interest' document (EOI) as a structure by which to evaluate progress at this point.

Addressing the objectives of the 'Institute of Advanced Teaching and Learning'

Academic Literacy

As anticipated in the EOI, students will have the opportunity to experience and reflect upon non-verbal communication; a skill pertinent to their academic and professional development.

Engagement with global culture

This project retains a largely non-verbal focus, ensuring that any learning can be replicated in non-English speaking countries without concern around a linguistic divide.

Interdisciplinarity

This project maintains an interdisciplinary focus, now aiming specifically at Medicine, Nursing and Social Work. Building on the lessons from previous interdisciplinary learning experiences with these students and professionals, we know that students gain a greater knowledge of each other's professions when given an opportunity to network at an early stage. This cultivates greater confidence in collaboration throughout traineeship and in the post-qualified professional career stage (Pollard et al, 2010).

Open Space Learning

Open space, experiential learning remains the intended method of delivery. Students will engage in 1:1 communication with people for whom verbal communication is secondary or very limited. A theatre practitioner with significant relevant experience has agreed to facilitate the intervention.

Community Engagement

A small number of people with learning disabilities, who live in Coventry and use specialist day services provided by Coventry City Council, will play an important role in teaching the students involved in this exercise. Their involvement has now been agreed.

Research-led learning

As this is an innovative approach, the outcomes will be thoroughly evaluated; to ensure that the strengths and weaknesses of this approach are identified and considered in the development of future teaching.

Project Outline

Overview

This project remains true to the overview provided in the EOI. It intends to instil a greater awareness and understanding of non-verbal communication itself, and of people with learning disabilities who do not use words as their preferred method of communication.

Key aims

- In order to promote a common starting point for the students engaging in this activity, the students will be given a short piece of preparatory reading around the prevalence and common experiences of non-verbal people with learning disabilities. This preparatory reading is currently being developed.
- By spending time alongside people with learning disabilities who are non-verbal, in a non-pressured situation, where no medical or social issue need be resolved, students will have the opportunity to simply listen, observe and overcome anxieties around their non-verbal communication. This skill is key for Health and Social Care Professionals (Local Government and Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman, 2009)
- The people with learning disabilities who have been selected for this opportunity have profound cognitive impairments and as such, are not usually active in the education of professionals. This is intended to widen the breadth of experiences that students are exposed to as part of their training.
- Within the preparatory reading, the importance of non-verbal communication skills with the whole population will be reinforced.

Planned approach

It is planned that 15 students will be identified. 5 will be recruited from the University of Warwick Medical School; these students will be undertaking an attachment called 'learning from lives' in which their main learning objective is to understand the experiences of people living with long term health conditions, such as learning disabilities and associated health complications. Dr Ann Jackson is supporting the recruitment of these students. A further 5 will be recruited from Coventry University's Bachelor's degree in Nursing. Pat Bluteau has agreed to support in the recruitment of these students. A further 5 students will be recruited from the Master's degree in Social Work at the University of Warwick, this will form a voluntary part of the 'Community Care' module; for which I am the module leader.

Within the University of Warwick's School of Health and Social Studies, is located a body called UNTRAP (Universities/User Teaching and Research Action Partnership). UNTRAP exists to ensure that patients and service users are respected as partners in health and social care research and teaching. The approach outlined has been developed in discussion with the UNTRAP co-ordinator; and it is hoped that through the levels of service user payment negotiated and agreed through UNTRAP, this approach could remain viable and be perpetuated with following cohorts.

The precise approach taken to facilitate communication and interaction on the day of the sessions is yet to be finalised, however, discussions with Princethorpe day service (a day service for people with profound learning disabilities) and a local theatre practitioner who has experience of working with people with limited verbal communication skills is ongoing. Approach to be finalised in January 2012.

Intended outcomes

By taking a multi-faceted approach to the communication opportunities, we hope to gain an understanding of precisely which interactions are considered to be effective, and which ineffective in terms of building understanding with this client group.

Timescale

As outlined in the Memorandum of Understanding, the commencement of this project was delayed by two months. The teaching intervention was due to take place in December 2011. It will now take place during the week commencing 13th February 2012. This date has been chosen in order to maximise availability of and relevance to learning for the students concerned. It is anticipated that the evaluation documents, and the DVD footage of the session will provide a wide range of evaluative data for consideration.

Student Focus

As detailed above, the students are now to be drawn from this slightly narrower field of disciplines. This is due to the very authentic overlap in their learning objectives. However, depending on the outcomes, there may be scope for a teaching session of this nature to be replicated within education, law and other professions to whom this learning may be relevant.

Embedding to project within the University

As noted in the EOI and above, these professional courses have explicit commitments to include the expertise of patients and service users as part of the student learning experience. As such, there is funding available for these participants to be paid for their time. Discovering what makes a successful learning experience when working with non-verbal people is key to ensuring that this commitment is fully met. Replicating events of this

nature should be possible within the current available funding. The challenge will be identifying ways in which this opportunity can be afforded to larger student groups.

A number of organisational and access issues have become apparent during the planning for this teaching intervention. The University catering team have advised us that they are able to provide refreshments to meet some quite specialist dietary needs, such as blended and soft foods. Issues around accessible toileting and changing facilities have been more difficult to accommodate. There are no accessible changing facilities, fitted with hoists available for use by University visitors during February 2012. The only facilities of this kind are located within adapted University Accommodation, which is occupied by students on a residential basis. This access issue has been partially overcome, on a 'one-off' basis, through the use of Coventry City Council's facilities. This access issue places limitations on the feasible duration of such an interaction, and may hinder the future broadening of service user led education on the University site.

Dissemination of outcomes

As noted in the EOI, the findings from this research may be relevant to a number of professional publications. Once evaluated, the research will be presented for consideration by SWAP, Community Care and the Social Care Institute for Excellence. I will discuss with my interprofessional colleagues, the potential opportunities for these findings to be disseminated outside of social work education.

Budget

It is anticipated that the budget will remain largely as planned – the main expense will be the time, transport and hospitality for the people with learning disabilities. The next significant expense will be the theatre practitioner, other costs are minimal

Ethical issues

At the commencement of this project, it was unclear as to whether formal ethics committee approval would be required. A project of this small scale would not normally require formal approval, however, the vulnerable nature of the participants and the innovation involved suggested otherwise. After clarification, it was agreed that this project would need to undergo formal ethical consideration, usually reserved for more significant research projects (as opposed to evaluated innovative teaching interventions). This was a relatively time consuming process, particularly as the Health and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) considers applications only during planned sittings. However, formal ethical approval was granted earlier this month, and the project must now progress within the manner described in the application for ethical approval.

Support/involvement of Head of School.

The Head of School remains supportive of this project. She encouraged collaboration with Prof. Kate Seers, School Head of Research. Both of whom approved the application for ethical approval.

Summary

With confirmation of partner agencies and practitioners, as well as formal ethical approval, the focus is now on finalising the explanatory student 'pack' and gathering formal consent from all participants. Once the lesson plan itself is finalised, the evaluation process will be confirmed.

References

Local Government Ombudsman and Parliamentary and Health Services Ombudsman 2009 *Six Lives: The provision of public services to people with learning disabilities*. London: HMSO

Pollard, K, Thoms, J and Miers, M (Eds) 2010 *Understanding Interprofessional Working in Health and Social Care: Theory and Practice*. Basingstoke: Macmillan