



Teaching Students with Sensory Impairments

Developed by Patricia Carlton and Jennifer Hertzfeld The Ohio State
University Partnership Grant
Improving the Quality of Education for Students with Disabilities

Introduction

Students with sensory disabilities such as those who have a visual impairment, are blind, have a hearing loss, or are deaf, often bring auxiliary aids and adaptive equipment to the classroom (e.g., dog, cane, interpreter). These aids assist in gaining access to the classroom; however, they do not ensure access. The classroom instructor is responsible for considering the needs of every student when teaching. For example, your instruction including lectures, website, videos, overheads, handouts, and textbook must be accessible to the students.

If you would like verification that a student has a disability and you have not received any documentation from University Disability Services (UDS), ask the student to provide you with a current disclosure form from UDS. Our office only produces these forms for students who are registered with this office and for whom documentation of the disability is on file.

Blind or Visual Impairment

Students with visual impairments are constantly challenged by classroom instructional strategies. Although they can easily hear lectures and discussions, it can be difficult for them to access class syllabi, textbooks, overhead projector transparencies, PowerPoint presentations, the chalkboard, maps, videos, written exams, demonstrations, library materials, and films. A large part of traditional learning is visual; fortunately, many students with visual disabilities have developed strategies to learn.

Students with visual impairments or who are blind vary considerably. For example, some students have no vision; others are able to see large forms; others can see print if magnified; and still others have tunnel vision with no peripheral vision or the reverse. Furthermore, some students with visual impairments use Braille, and some have little or no knowledge of Braille. A variety of accommodations, equipment, and compensatory strategies are used based upon the widely varying needs of each student. Many students make use of adaptive technology, especially text to speech. Textbooks are often converted and put on equipment for later use. Others use equipment to enlarge print.

Guidelines

Preferential Seating: Students with visual impairments may need preferential seating since they depend upon listening. Since they may want the same anonymity as other students, it is important that you avoid pointing out the student or the alternative arrangements to others in the class.

Exam Accommodations: Exam accommodations, which may include adaptive technology, a reader/scribe and extra time, a computer, Braille, enlargements, and image enhanced materials, may be needed. These arrangements can be coordinated with UDS.

Arranging for Accommodations: A meeting with the student is essential to facilitate the arrangements of accommodations and auxiliary aids which may include, in addition to exam accommodations, access to class notes and/or the taping of lectures; print material in alternative format; a script with verbal descriptions of videos or slides, charts, and graphs, or other such visual depictions converted to tactile representations.

Orientation to Classroom: You may also ask the student privately if he/she would like an orientation to the physical layout of the room with locations of steps, furniture, lecture position, low-hanging objects or any other obstacles.

Use of Language: Although it is unnecessary to rewrite the entire course, you can help a student with a visual impairment by avoiding phrases such as “Look at this” and “Examine that,” while pointing to an overhead projection. Use descriptive language. Repeat aloud what is written on an overhead or chalkboard.

Lab Assistance: Students with a vision impairment may need a lab assistant or lab partner in lab classes. Assist the student in finding an assistant.

Print Material in Alternative Format: Have copies of the syllabus and reading assignments ready three to five weeks prior to the beginning of classes. Students with visual impairments will likely need all print material in alternative format which means that they need print material converted to audio format, Braille, enlarged font or enhanced images. Conversion of materials takes time. It is important that they have access to class materials at the same time as others in your class. Coordinate alternative format with UDS.

Guide Dogs: Keep in mind that guide dogs are working animals. They must be allowed in all classes. Do not feed or pet a guide dog. Since they are working, they should not be distracted.

Deaf or Hard of Hearing

Individuals with hearing loss rely upon visual input rather than auditory input when communicating. Using visual aspects of communication (body language, gestures, and facial expression) often feels awkward to people who are accustomed to the auditory; however, it is essential that faculty learn to effectively communicate with students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

Students who have any level of hearing loss do not all have the same characteristics. Some have a measure of usable residual hearing and use a device to amplify sounds (FM system). Some choose to speak; others use very little or no oral communication. Some students are extremely adept at speech reading, while others have very limited ability to “read lips.” For some, sign language is the preferred means of communication; other communication choices include gestures and writing. Most students who are deaf or hard of hearing have experience communicating with the hearing population. Let them be the guide on how best to communicate.

Guidelines

Gaining Attention: Make sure you have the student's attention before speaking. A light touch on the shoulder, a wave, or other visual signal will help.

Preferential Seating: Allow the student and interpreter to decide on optimal seating based on sightlines.

Effective Communication: Don't talk with your back to the class (for example, when writing on the chalkboard). It destroys any chance of the student getting facial or speech reading cues. Your face and mouth need to be clearly visible at all times. Avoid sitting with your back to a window, chewing gum, biting on a pencil, or other similar obstructions.

Videos and Slides: Provide videos and slides with captioning. If captioning is not available, supply an outline or summary of the materials covered. If an interpreter is in the classroom, make sure that he/she is visible.

Class Discussion: When students make comments in class or ask questions, repeat the questions before answering, or phrase your answers in such a way that the questions are obvious.

Class Notes: Students may need your assistance in getting class notes if UDS is unable to locate a note taker. When a student is using a sign language interpreter or captioning or lip-reading, it is difficult to take good notes simultaneously.

Role of the Interpreter: The interpreter is in the classroom only to facilitate communication. They should not be asked to run errands, proctor exams or discuss the student's personal issues. They should not participate in the class in any way or express personal opinions.

Interpreter Classroom Etiquette: The interpreter is in the classroom to facilitate communication for both the student and the instructor. Speak directly to the student, even though it may be the interpreter who clarifies information for you. Likewise, the interpreter may request clarification from you to insure accuracy of the information conveyed.

English as a Second Language: For many students who are deaf, English is a second language. When grading written assignments and/or essay tests, look for accurate and comprehensive content rather than writing style. Students should be encouraged to go to WALES for assistance if necessary.

Resources

See previous publications

Important Note

This information is available in alternate format upon request. Please call University Disability Services at 570-389-4491.

This publication is funded by the US Department of Education under project #738322. For additional copies or more information, please contact:

Margo Izzo, Ph. D., Phone: 614-292-9218, Email: izzo.1@osu.edu

Ann Yurcisin, ED.S., Phone: 614-292-3307, Email: yurcisin.1@osu.edu