

DE ANZA COLLEGE
DEAF SERVICES

FAQS: ABOUT TEACHING DEAF STUDENTS

Dr. Elliot McIntire, a Geography professor at C.S.U., Northridge for many years, recently published an article describing his experiences of working with deaf/hard-of-hearing students. The following excerpt answers questions that have been posed by professors who are new to teaching deaf/hard-of-hearing students.

What special preparation did you get before you had deaf students in class?

None. On our campus, each instructor, whose class will have one or more deaf students, receives a letter from the support services office, giving the names of the students and detailing the sorts of help that are available. But I got no special training, workshops, or anything like that.

How did you feel about it the first time?

Panicked! I had lots of questions. How would I communicate? The letter mentioned an interpreter, but just how did that work? Should I do things differently than I usually did? Would deafness cut the student off from important material? If so, what? That first class was as much a learning experience for me as it was for the student.

How did it work? Were there really problems?

It worked fine. The problems I anticipated turned out to be very minor. I have modified my teaching techniques a bit, but I suspect the changes have been as helpful to my hearing students as to the deaf students.

What sort of changes have you made?

I tend to use more visual aids. Maps and diagrams are common in geography classes, but I take advantage of the visual modality whenever I can. I don't talk while facing the chalkboard. I make sure new and unfamiliar terminology gets written on the board. Of course, this helps hearing students.

Is the interpreter a big help to the student?

My feeling is that the interpreter is an enormous help to me. I have information I want to give to all the students. The interpreter makes it available to the deaf students in the same way the hearing students get it. It means I get through to all my students equally.

Is it distracting? Don't the hearing students watch the interpreter instead of you?

No. Sometimes, for the first day or two, students tend to watch the interpreter – especially in classes which are mostly freshmen who have never seen interpreting before. But the novelty soon fades, and we have so many deaf students on our campus that most of the time no one pays any attention.

What else does the interpreter do to help you?

Nothing. The interpreter is not an extra pair of hands to help me hand back exams or to tutor the students. The interpreter is there so I can talk to the students, and they can talk to me when they have questions or comments. The class runs just as if the interpreter were not there.

How do deaf students take notes?

It is next to impossible for the deaf student to watch the interpreter and take notes at the same time.

What about exams? How does the interpreter help?

The interpreter isn't there for exams unless the student has requested it. Then they are there only to cover explanations that I may have before the test.

What happens if there is an error on the exam? What do you do?

I simply write the correction on the board, and make sure the deaf students look at the board.

How do the deaf students do?

Like any other group of students. Some of them do very well indeed. Most are about average, and some don't do very well.

What do you do if the deaf students don't do very well?

The same thing I do for my hearing students. I tell them I am available for conferences, let them know what tutoring services are available, and then they are on their own. They are college students, after all, and are responsible for their own lives. I don't take care of them; I simply present them with the same options as other students. Given equal opportunity, most make reasonable decisions and learn and grow. But best of all, when they do well, they know they did it themselves, not because someone was taking care of them or because they got lots of extra help.

Don't many deaf students have problems with English? Does that affect your class?

It depends. Some do have problems with English, and this shows-up, particularly on essay exams and term papers. It was only after some time that I realized that for many deaf students, English is a second language. We have many students from other countries for which English is a second language, and the problems faced by the deaf students are much the same.

How do you feel about teaching deaf students now that you've done it for a while?

Very positive. For myself, I find that I think more carefully about what I do in the classroom (i.e., How can I make this clearer? What is a good example for this principle?) then I would otherwise, and this benefits all my students. I think the experience is also beneficial for the deaf students. They find that they can interact and compete with the hearing students on an equal basis, and succeed or fail based on their own skills and abilities, and not because of some outside factor.