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Toward Collaboration and Community in Student-Faculty Relationships

By: Mary V. Compton
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Abstract

Central to support services for deaf and hard-of-hearing college students is the creation of processes through which deaf students and hearing faculty recognize and respect each other's cultural values. This article describes how conversations from a focus group of deaf students and conversations from a focus group of hearing faculty reflect cross-cultural relatedness and community within a traditional liberal arts university. Higgins' (1980) conceptualization of interdependence and Palmer's (1987) notions of relatedness and community served as the framework by which the conversations were analyzed. Communicating in class, using interpreters and notetakers, and establishing identity in the academic community emerged as themes that shaped both students' and faculty members' perceptions of deafness. The individual and group insights constructed a collaborative community within the larger context of the academy.

Introduction

The purpose of this essay is to describe how texts from a focus group of deaf students and a focus group of hearing faculty may be interpreted in order to facilitate cross-cultural relatedness and community in the academy. Parker Palmer, a proponent of community in higher education, argued for the generation of an academic

community in which individuals can expand their capacity for relatedness and engage in creative conflict. He asserted that, "Knowing and learning are communal acts. They require many eyes and ears, many observations and experiences. They require a continual cycle of discussion, disagreement, and consensus over what has been seen and what it all means" (Palmer, 1987, p. 25).

At The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, a faculty member in the Education of Deaf Children program and the program coordinator for Disabled Student Services (DSS) sought to extend Palmer's notion of community by collaborating in designing and conducting a formative evaluation of the services and climate for the students who are deaf on their campus. The authors embraced Palmer's tenet that community embodies a capacity for individuals to become interconnected. Therefore, the authors were particularly concerned with obtaining the experiences and perceptions of both the students who are deaf and the hearing faculty. It was important that the evaluation process foster a sense of community and belonging while gathering information to shape academic services.

A student who is deaf can be very isolated on a hearing campus. Foster (1989) suggested that deaf and hearing people create the social meaning of deafness through interaction. "Historically, the

dominant hearing culture has assigned deaf people to outsider social roles, and in response, deaf people developed a shared understanding of these roles. Sometimes this understanding led them to challenge these interpretations. It has led them to create alternatives for themselves and other deaf people" (Foster, 1989, p. 226). In addition, Humphries (1983) advised that, "The success of Deaf people on a Hearing college campus may be directly related to how well the Deaf person is able to interact with the Hearing campus' personnel across their respective cultures" (Humphries, 1983, p. 39). He stated that it is critical for members of the academy to understand how people who are deaf perceive themselves and acknowledge their values related to language use, hearing, and their social identity. These concerns constitute potential cultural conflict and yet, they create opportunities for postsecondary service providers to establish Palmer's sense of community within the academy for deaf college students. Thus, the academy should celebrate the growth of knowledge as students and faculty participate in conversation with and among each other.

Focus groups seemed to meet these requirements. Although focus groups have been used in market research for many years, they have only recently gained recognition in higher education (Jacobi, 1991) as a useful qualitative research technique. Focus groups incorporate group interviews which rely on the

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interactions of the participants with the researcher acting as the moderator. The fundamental data that focus groups provide are the transcripts of the group discussion (Morgan, 1988).

Two focus groups were convened: one composed of deaf students; one of hearing faculty members. Four students were invited, however, only two students participated in the student focus group: David and Amy (pseudonyms). The male student, David, is currently enrolled in a doctoral program in the College of Arts and Sciences. The only support service he utilizes is notetakers. His primary means of communication is through speech. He was deafened as a young child and has always been educated in mainstreamed settings. The female student, Amy, was a student at UNCG for one summer session. While at UNCG, she used interpreters, notetakers, and tutoring. She received her bachelor's degree from Gallaudet University with a major in communications. She is currently employed at a local bank. She was born deaf and was educated in residential schools for the deaf. Her primary means of communicating is through signing.

Faculty members who taught the deaf students were invited to attend the faculty focus group. Three faculty members actually participated. None of the faculty participants had any prior experience with students who are deaf. It should be noted that two of these faculty members taught an undergraduate student, Sharon, who did not participate in the student focus group. Sharon uses manual communication and her educational background is similar to Amy's in that she was educated in residential schools for deaf students before coming to college. The third faculty member was one of David's teachers. One of the student focus group

participants, Amy, did not have a faculty member present in the faculty focus group.

In the process of planning these focus groups, considerable time was given to the selection of an interpreter. Because the interpreter is a key component of services, particular information about the quality of interpreting is critical. Wilson (1984) stated that even with an estimated 80% of the interpreters listed with Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID), the guidelines for RID were developed for non-educational needs. Wilson stressed that teachers need input from interpreters on what is working and what is causing problems for students who are deaf. An experienced certified interpreter who was new to the students was used for the student focus group in order to assure privacy and more freedom to discuss the quality of interpreter services.

Each focus group was videotaped, following which written transcripts of each videotape were prepared. The content of the transcripts were read and analyzed for themes of community building. The following themes emerged from the focus groups: a) experiences with interpreters and notetakers; b) communicating in class; communicating with instructors; and c) acceptance by faculty and university community.

Experiences With Interpreters and Notetakers

Not unexpectedly, the quality, variety, and availability of interpreting concern both students and faculty. Amy, who used an interpreter during a summer school class, asserted a deaf individual's desire to have access to basic knowledge:

I believe that if you provide interpreters, the interpreter

should be very good because you get information from the lecture that is very important. For individual students, some prefer ASL or straight English so they can have more successful communication. My priority would be on finding the best qualified interpreters to meet the students' needs. I think they should have one or two back ups or substitutes because it has happened to me where the interpreter was not there. I missed out on the information. So a substitute should be available.

That a faculty member voiced a similar observation in terms of an interpreter's ability to convey accurately content knowledge emphasized an understanding of the crucial role of an interpreter in the academy. If, in Palmer's (1987) perspective, a portion of the mission of the academy is to transmit knowledge, then the interpreter becomes THE means through which that knowledge is transmitted to deaf students in the academy. A faculty member verified the need for an interpreter who can comprehend course content:

The interpreter was not grounded enough in the subject to do adequate interpretation. So at the beginning we had a lot of miscommunication because the interpreter was not familiar enough with the concepts and terminology to do an adequate job.

In contrast, the role of the educational interpreter as a facilitator of communication, not solely as a technician, appeared as the same faculty member lauded the efforts of another interpreter to enhance a deaf student's attention.

. . . the interpreter is not a machine. Yes, some of them came in, sat down, did their thing; never talked to me, never

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talked to her. What was most useful to me was the one interpreter who made a point of, sort of pull her back from where she (the deaf student) was wandering off to the edges of things. That interpreter, who saw that as part of her function made me feel that I could say to her, "now I need to talk to Sharon." This was a very different thing than an interpreter who understood her task as just a technical kind of function.

However, the presence of an interpreter distracted and disconcerted several faculty members. One described the experience "... as if I were watching myself in shadow. [Communication] doesn't feel direct, it doesn't feel direct with an interpreter." The faculty member who supported the interpreter as a facilitator of communication adds:

It was like hearing an echo, a silent echo, and being careful of what you say and how you say it—consciously thinking about it all the time.

The presence of a third party in the professor-student relationship stimulates what Palmer (1987) terms "creative conflict" as these professors share their feelings of alienation. At the same time, compassion for the interpreter in group discussion and the impact of the interpreter on class discussion contributes to the same professor's contradictory views of the interpreter:

... when the discussion got hot and heavy, it was like I felt sorry for the interpreter, trying to interpret, so the students had to make a conscious effort in terms of slowing down, everybody didn't wait their turn, so that impacted on the discussion process. Sometimes it was enriching.

Although faculty do not mention note taking, securing a note

taker became the initial topic upon which David and Amy collaborated and commiserated. David initiated the interchange:

When I first came here DSS was not able to find anyone to take notes for me but I found a classmate who was sitting next to me who let me copy their notes. It worked well, but I would really rather have someone who could come to every class that I could depend on.

Amy added her experiences: *That happened to me, too. I had a hard time finding note takers I could trust to take the most important information, but not delete information. So I tried to find someone that was willing to take notes for me. Some didn't want to.*

Thus, the students created an episode of relatedness across divergent versions of deafness. The above exchange illustrated how they share an experience in which each has been disengaged by hearing classmates. Consequently, the students commonality of experience enabled them to construct an identity of themselves as members of the deaf community that Higgins (1980) described.

Communicating in Class

Communication patterns in the classroom varied with the communication mode preferred by each of the students. One faculty member who taught David expressed his frustrations:

He's a student who doesn't know sign language. He's very good at lipreading. Very good at understanding what I was saying and what other students were saying. Because he doesn't use an interpreter, it was very difficult for him to participate in class by making

contributions. He is not very easily understood. I think it is very difficult for other students. I found it a bit frustrating, but he is a fine student and a fine person—and he has the respect of the other students in the class. He just couldn't contribute to the seminar in as full a way as I would have wished. I didn't know how to deal with it. It became more of a one way communication except for written work...

Similarly, David disclosed his feelings of stress when communicating in class:

When I'm in class in a group of people, I don't communicate well because I have to make my speech understood by a lot of other people and that puts a lot of pressure on me. That's when I don't perform as well.

Both the professor and David displayed their expectations and conflict as they struggled to interact beyond superficial conversation. From the professor's perspective, David's abilities were noteworthy; however, interacting would have been easier for him and other students if David's speech were more intelligible—a fact that David perceived as stressful. From David's perspective, his oral communication performance contributed to his identity as an oral deaf person (Higgins, 1980; Foster, 1989); however, his speech intelligibility created a barrier to fully contributing to class discussions.

A faculty member, who taught Sharon, recounted how she engaged her in class discussion.

I got her to talk. She would sit there silent and withdrawn from the class, so I have a number of techniques I use with students period. We would go around the room and when it came her turn she would have to sign to the interpreter what

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she had to say and I think, really, it added something to the class, having to stop and recognize her presence.

Another faculty member described the alterations she made in her classroom interactions to clarify communication with Sharon:

I tried more facing and looking at the students when I was talking, and slowing down my speech too, which is a problem because I tend to talk too fast. Sometimes I would touch her so she would look at me and then talk.

Communicating With Instructors

David and Amy's reflections concerning communicating with instructors in one-on-one interactions demonstrated themes of gender sensitivity and a desire for independence. David declared that he found it easier to converse with female instructors:

because women professors take more time—are more patient. They make more of an attempt to communicate verbally; whereas, men give up quickly and resort to writing back and forth. The thing is with me, after they have trouble understanding me the first time, their immediate reaction is to have me write down a message, and once they do that the first time, that is the only way we can communicate thereafter. With women, they will attempt to understand me three or four times before they try to write it out and even then, the next time they have trouble they will still attempt to achieve a verbal message for conversation.

Amy, who uses signing as her preferred mode of communication, wrote messages back and forth when conversing with her instructors.

I prefer to write to the instructor between the two of us because I would be as independent as possible. When you have an interpreter you bring in another person to the communication. Because I have a hard time finding an interpreter, I don't want to have to depend on an interpreter.

David responded to her statement with the following assertion:

I can understand that. I feel the same way. I don't want to have to rely on someone else to communicate for me. I think it's very important that we as deaf people achieve our own sort of independence in terms of how we communicate with other people.

Again, David and Amy clearly established relatedness even though their experiences are from opposite poles in their construction of deafness. In spite of this difference, they both expressed a desire to retain independence in communicating.

Acceptance by Faculty and University Community

Amy and David engaged in a dialogue to remark that they felt accepted and welcome in the academy. As Amy explained:

Although I was here for a short time, there was one teacher I found more interesting and enthusiastic. She expressed more openness. I found that she was more friendly; trying to understand how I felt or how other deaf students feel.

David interjected and asserted: *She looked at you not as a person with a handicap but just as a student."*

Amy continued enthusiastically: *Like other students, yes. She didn't see me as a special*

student. I was the same. She treated me equally. Not as special or more favored no. I liked that. I don't like to be special or favored. I prefer to be equal.

Thus, Amy and David expanded the parameters of their shared beliefs as they stated how their instructors recognized them as individuals.

David described a particularly meaningful relationship with a female professor:

I've always felt that my favorite professors have been people who were able to discount my handicap and once they get past that it makes communication easier. There is one woman who I am working with now. She's very helpful, very insightful. She has helped me look into myself and understand the kinds of problems I'm going to face as a deaf person teaching people who hear. I really wish more of my professors could be like her because just as with Amy's professor, she treats me just like she treats everyone else.

However, in spite of this professor, David admitted:

I think that so far as the English department is concerned, that I'm sort of an experiment for them because they have never had a deaf student in their program. I think they are very curious to see how it works out. I think they are very positive about it. They want me to do well. They want me to be successful. Because then in a sense that would make them look good.

David's emerging awareness of his cultural status and his realization of the implications of his deafness upon his career aspirations converged as he expressed his perception of himself:

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I've never felt like an outcast. Part of that is because my handicap is not visible. People don't look at me as a handicapped individual. I know that when I start to speak, that they sense that there is something different about me and of course someone who doesn't know me often has a pretty strong reaction to that. But that doesn't bother me. If I'm going to get to know that person, then they'll get used to it. If not, I'll never see them again, so it doesn't matter.

Amy's efforts to connect with her fellow employees revealed her view of herself as a young deaf woman and displayed facets of Foster's (1989) depiction of the social isolation and alienation that characterize many deaf persons' lives:

At first, I found it difficult making them accept who I am because they were sort of standoffish, afraid to face me, to start communication. I always had to make the first move by writing a note, facing them and being more eager. I want to work hard to get them to come to me and I want to explain that I'm not an awful person or I won't bite and I'll be nice. I'm friendly. I want to communicate, want to be involved, a part of the team.

In contrast, David forwarded his view of deafness as an individual difference:

You can't just tell people this is the way to deal with a deaf or hard of hearing person because we're all different and there are different ways of dealing with individuals.

However, Amy's declaration that, *It's a small world in a big world*, affirmed the social, political, and cultural implications of deaf students in the liberal arts academy.

Discussion

Palmer's notion that, "Knowing and learning are communal acts," has been realized in this project. The shared perspectives of students, faculty, and colleagues have enlarged the scope of community within the academy. Novel ways of relating within and among individuals created connections that continue to generate and transmit knowledge and feelings.

As a result of these interconnections, new communities emerged. These particular gatherings of faculty or students had never occurred before. This was the first time that the students who are deaf had any social interaction with one another. They entered into real conversation about their lives and their aspirations for life after the university. Each student explored his or her social construction of deafness in sharing perceptions about interpreters and notetakers, communication in class and acceptance within the academy. Faculty members encountered the profound sense of isolation and frustration that students who are deaf often experience. The interchanges within the faculty focus group may have been the first time that any of these faculty members have admitted feelings of helplessness to other professionals. As each student and faculty member demonstrated relatedness, genuine community and a sense of social selves was generated.

The co-authors were aware of each other's presence on the campus, but had never had occasion to work together. Dr. Compton initiated the contact after she had a student who was deaf in class. She wanted to know more about the support services for deaf students. The program coordinator welcomed the opportunity to work with both faculty and students as colleagues and co-researchers. From the authors'

conversation through planning and conducting the focus groups, analyzing the transcripts, and preparing this text, a sense of interdependency has evolved. The program coordinator heightened her sensitivity to deaf culture and the social and educational implications of deafness. The faculty member in the Education of Deaf Children extended her knowledge of the dynamics involved in providing support services for deaf students in postsecondary academic settings. This relationship established by the program coordinator and faculty member freed them to use intuition and knowledge to create a more connected way of knowing.

The focus group process allowed for individual expression, but the knowledge that it generated was greater than that of any one individual. It was a collaborative experience which generated both individual and group insights. Just as Palmer predicted, this was a compelling process: "Truth is an eternal conversation about things that matter conducted with passion and discipline" (Palmer, 1991, p. 33). Thus, if we want deaf students and hearing faculty to collaborate and build community within the academy, we must consistently offer them opportunities to live in the conversations they create. Through these conversations, deaf students and hearing faculty can continue to explore each other's social meaning of deafness and work toward consensus.

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