

Workshop 1b: Communicating with deaf people in the library – Margaret Forrest

Notes – Briony Birdi

Quite often a session is given the title 'workshop' without there being any opportunity for participants to 'work', to join in and experience things for themselves. Margaret's session was quite different. 'How easy is it to hear in this room?', she began by asking us, making us focus immediately on issues for those with hearing difficulties. Working with a partner, we then exchanged 3 pieces of information, and had to communicate them back to the whole group in a way which would be most helpful for our deaf colleagues. Not an easy exercise, but definitely a useful one, and what did we learn? That almost all of us had some experience of deafness, either in our family or at work, which is not surprising given that deafness affects 1 in 7 of the UK population.

Margaret then talked us through the two types of deafness, *conductive deafness* – whereby sound is not getting through clearly to the sensitive receptors of the inner ear - and *sensori-neural* deafness – where there is a failure of the receptors or the nerves that take the signal to the brain. Discussing how life might be for either of these people, we considered the following comment from the British Society of Hearing Therapists:

'For a person with an acquired hearing loss, communication becomes increasingly difficult. Speech sounds are blurred, and half-heard comments are treated with suspicion or ignored. Frustration, depression, isolation and feelings of inadequacy are commonplace. The normal hearing world becomes increasingly difficult to cope with.'

So how do we identify a person with hearing difficulties? Margaret talked us through the following examples, some of which were obvious, others much less so:

- Finds it very difficult to hear conversation in a noisy environment
- Leans forward (hand behind ear)
- Unable to hear normal voice with back turned
- Misunderstands, especially on the telephone
- Looks directly at the person speaking
- Requests better lighting or moves to ensure speaker is facing the light

- Wears a hearing aid or tinnitus masker (although these can be hidden under hair!)
- Talks too loud or has unclear speech.

Deafness clearly comes in many different forms, and as Margaret said to us, 'I don't want you to leave the workshop saying "I know what a deaf person looks like"'.

Back in small groups, we then discussed what we could do to make it easier to communicate with deaf library users – and for deaf library users to communicate with us. With a deaf person in my group, I found it very helpful to learn of some of the issues she regularly faces, such as people making assumptions about her intelligence due to her apparent lack of understanding, people patronising her, even apologising for her condition, and not treating her with the respect she deserves. Feeding our ideas back, Margaret then shared her own ideas for good practice, which included 'Find a suitable place to talk, with good lighting, away from noise and distractions'. She suggested, 'face the strongest source of light, and if you're aware of background noise, move away from it to speak to the person'. Another key point was to be patient, and take the time to communicate properly – always maintaining the same level of friendliness, even if asked for something to be repeated 2/3 times.

This was a fascinating session, obviously of vital importance to any of us when working with members of the public.

For **further information**, go to any of the following web pages:

- RNID – <http://www.rnid.org.uk>
 - o See also 'Communication Tips', at http://www.rnid.org.uk:80/information_resources/factsheets/communication/factsheets_leaflets/communication_tips.htm
- British Deaf Association – <http://bda.org.uk/>
- Hearing Concern – <http://www.hearingconcern.org.uk/>