

# Supporting Deaf Students— AND ALL STUDENTS

*These strategies can help students thrive by recognizing and valuing the differences they bring to the classroom.*

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**W**hen a student who uses hearing aids or sign language shows up in your classroom, what is your first reaction? Is it anxiety because you don't know how to communicate with the new student?

Is it panic over managing interactions between the deaf or hard-of-hearing student (hereafter, deaf) and your other students? Is it uneasiness at having an adult interpreter in the classroom? Is it anger at the addition of yet another student with special needs to your class load? In our work in schools, we've seen all of these responses. In this article, we want to show you some strategies that can turn such negative feelings into positive anticipation.

Two of us (Christina and Thangi) are faculty members and one (Joseph) is a PhD student at Gallaudet University, the world's only university for deaf individuals. From its

earliest days, the university has navigated the concepts of *disability* and *difference*, dealing with some of the same questions that teachers in K–12 schools may face today. Should deaf students receive an oral education so that they can be “normalized” into hearing society—a society that views people who cannot speak or hear as less-than? Or should American Sign Language (ASL) be offered so that deaf students can learn through a language that's natural and accessible, and allows them to grow into their own identities? Can teaching be restructured so that deaf and hearing students learn as equal partners?

## **Flipping the Script: Deaf-Gain**

At Gallaudet, we approach our deaf students as individuals who do *not* have disabilities. They do not hear, and that is not an issue. The students just need to learn through





nonauditory means. ASL is highly valued and is used in all classes and public events by default, but spoken English is also recognized and has its place.

On campus, spaces are designed for open, visual communication. ASL is the language of the classroom because it supports direct communication, and thus stronger relationships, between teachers and students. At Gallaudet, being deaf is not only the normal, everyday way of being; it is cherished. Deaf people share a culture and a language that places value on being deaf, recognizes shared experiences, and relishes deaf individuals' contributions to society.

As educators, the three of us have all taught and worked in a wide variety of K–12 and higher education classrooms with deaf students. Collectively, we have experience in residential schools for the deaf, center-based programs for deaf students, and general-education settings that serve deaf

students and hearing students together. We aim to educate both adults and students on the concept of *Deaf-Gain*, which reframes the idea of *losing hearing* into one of *gaining deafness* and recognizes the contributions that deaf people make to society (Bauman & Murray, 2009).

It's not easy; we face many barriers. For example, when participating in an outdoor education program with her 6th graders, Christina was told that she was the only teacher who would be required to sleep in a cabin with her students because her students were deaf. When she pushed back, the team leader resisted, despite being offered alternatives that provided the deaf students with access to communication but did not single them out. Eventually, a solution was worked out, but it came with a warning that it would only be acceptable if the parents were informed that there would be no teacher in the cabin with their deaf



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children. This team leader perceived the deaf children as deficient instead of as whole human beings who simply needed minor modifications to enjoy the same experience as their peers.

Rather than viewing deaf students as needing intervention, we need to recognize the benefits diverse students bring to the classroom. To illustrate, as an elementary school principal at the American School for the Deaf, Thangi arranged a partnership between kindergartners at her school and a neighboring Montessori school. The deaf students were exposed to the enriching experience of the Montessori curriculum, while the hearing students were exposed to the richness of ASL. They learned how to communicate visually in ways that did not disrupt the flow of the classroom.

### **Designing Learning That Works for All**

Joseph was formerly an English-language arts instructor in an ASL and

English bilingual secondary school that enrolled both deaf and hearing students. He and his team often had to reframe the perception of what it means to be deaf, explore strategies that worked for all students in a cohort, and incorporate Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles into instruction.

UDL helps us approach planning by looking at *all* of our students as individuals with unique learning profiles. The UDL framework allows educators to shrug off the “this-disability-equals-this-accommodation” formula and review what students need to participate in a particular unit, lesson, or activity. It enables us to design learning in a way that does not limit students by stereotypes or pre-existing expectations. In this context, here are a few strategies that support the learning needs of not only students who are deaf but also of their hearing counterparts.

### **Using Closed Captioning**

Closed captioning is an obvious strategy for educators who work with deaf students, but it also benefits students who are not deaf. Closed captioning provides deaf students with access to the words that are being spoken as well as important sounds that are part of a video. And hearing students, particularly English language learners, can benefit from seeing the written words while listening to what is being said, thus strengthening the connection between spoken and written words.

Closed captioning supports the language and literacy development of all students. This is typical of many

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UDL strategies—materials and procedures that improve accessibility for a particular subgroup actually benefit a broader group. Here are tips for using closed captioning successfully:

- Always check the video for the closed captioning symbol, and know how to turn the captions on before class starts.
- Change the color and size of captions whenever possible to make them accessible to students with visual differences.
- Filter searches on YouTube to show only closed-captioned videos, or use Amara to search for a list of videos with accurate captions (<http://amara.org/en/videos/watch>).
- Be aware of the difference between automatic captions, which are often



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Educators should also take time to think about how they present and organize visuals so they can do so in ways that benefit diverse classrooms. Some instructors speak while showing visual images. This can be confusing for deaf students, who must split their attention, looking at the interpreter or lipreading the teacher and examining the image at the same time (Mather & Clark, 2012). It can also confuse some hearing students, especially when they're beginning to learn new concepts. If you plan lessons to give students time to view visuals before you discuss them, students are likely to be more engaged with the lesson.

Here are a few more strategies you can implement to make the classroom more visual:

- Use gestures, props, or role plays to illustrate processes or ideas.
- Add pictorial or graphic representations to text content.
- Create videos to show how ideas connect.
- Provide graphic organizers or mind maps.
- Color code concepts and ideas.
- Be aware of visual needs as well; if colorblindness is an issue for any of your students, use bold, italics, white space, and other types of style formatting to differentiate text.
- Incorporate project-based learning activities that enable students to interact with artifacts and primary-source documents at their own pace.

### *Supporting Social Development*

Support for students' social development, which is important in all schools, has long been one of the strengths of state schools for the deaf. Students who are deaf are different from other minority groups in that they constitute a very small part of the population (less than 1 percent) and they often cannot even identify with

unintelligible, and closed captions, which are typed and reviewed.

- Sign up for the Described and Captioned Media Program ([www.dcmp.org](http://www.dcmp.org)) to locate free, accessible videos.

- Review the video product yourself, with captions, to ensure accuracy.

### *Making the Most of Visuals*

Deaf students access information and the world through visual and tactile means. Providing visual cues and information is a fundamental part of deaf education, one that also benefits hearing students.

One of Christina's most powerful learning experiences occurred during a professional development workshop. The facilitator was making a case for supporting students who had just arrived in the United States and who were expected to learn content even though they did not know English. The facilitator showed a video of an instructor teaching in Farsi, and then

asked the workshop participants questions about the topic of the lesson. No one in the workshop could answer the questions. The facilitator then showed the same lesson conducted in Farsi, but with the use of pictures and objects that provided context; this time, participants could answer most of the questions about the lesson. The power of using visuals to support learning for all students was made clear in this workshop—even to a veteran educator of deaf students.

We've found that anything that is language-based, whether oral or in print, can be supported with pictures, demonstrations, or graphics. Start small by identifying a slide or two in your next presentation that could use a makeover and representing that information in a visually appealing way. For example, when teaching complex verb tenses, use photos to illustrate actions. In social studies, use graphs or pictures to highlight concepts. It's worth the payoff in student learning.

their family members, who are usually hearing. Schools for the deaf provide linguistic and social access for students who are deaf by providing a critical mass of deaf students. Center-based programs can serve a similar purpose.

However, 80–85 percent of students who are identified as deaf or hard-of-hearing receive their education in their neighborhood school (U.S. Department of Education, 2015). In American Sign Language, the standard sign for “mainstream” is both hands in a five-handshape (all five fingers extended) overlapping. But this sign has recently changed so that one hand has only one finger extended, symbolizing the loneliness that the mainstreaming experience can generate.

Teachers in neighborhood schools who have deaf students in their classes must find a way to support these students’ social development and engagement. That’s no easy feat when you consider the common tendency of children to reject peers who are different, the challenges of communication, and the issue of having an adult interpreter present. This last item can be particularly tricky when students enter puberty and tend to reject adult intervention. Having an interpreter around may be a social liability; other students may feel uncomfortable with this adult interlocutor and therefore reject the deaf student’s participation in social groups.

But teachers can overcome these challenges with a bit of elbow grease, planning, and use of *multiple means of engagement*, the UDL principle that emphasizes bringing students’ lives and interests into instruction. Specific strategies for engaging students socially include the following:

- Provide examples of famous or influential deaf people in each content area as frequently as possible—for example, Beethoven (music), Thomas

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Edison (inventor), Vinton Cerf (commonly known as the “father of the Internet”), Annie Jump Cannon (astronomer), Marlee Matlin (actress), Connie Briscoe (author), and Dorothy Miles (poet).

- Teach students a variety of pro-social ways to interact with one another. Incorporate ASL signs into instruction, and teach hearing students the signs to communicate simple interactions like agreement or greeting. Enable students who are deaf to use text or chat programs, or a shared Google document, to connect in group discussions. Creating environments where all students can communicate more easily gives them equity in the classroom.

- Use a variety of grouping strategies to give students opportunities to work in smaller groups as well as larger groups.

- Create communication norms to allow for full participation in the classroom. For example, have one person speak at a time, have the speaker stand at the front of the room, ensure that the speaker is not moving and is facing the deaf student, and allow time for attention to move between speakers.

### Helping Students Thrive

When we change the stereotypical narrative that casts deaf students as having a disability and move to a nar-

rative that views them as learners with differences, we gain insight into strategies that benefit *all* students. This process is enacted daily on the campus of Gallaudet University and in many residential schools for the deaf around the world. The basic premise of Universal Design for Learning is that instructional materials and processes that give one student more access to learning in fact benefit all students—either directly, in terms of content, or indirectly, in terms of modelling equity. The strategies shared here will not only increase student achievement, but also help students thrive by giving them classrooms that recognize and value the differences they bring. 

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