

The Centre for Deaf Studies at the University of Bristol

Between its inception in the mid 1980s and its closure in 2014, staff at the Centre completed over 60 funded research projects, published hundreds of articles and gave presentations all over the world. The Centre provided a dedicated programme of degrees in Deaf Studies: BSc, MSc and PhD. Several hundred students completed those degrees and it has probably graduated more Deaf¹ higher degree candidates than any other University in Europe. From 1987, the Centre was responsible for the setting up of the support and access programme for deaf students right across the university. By 2010, 60% of the 24 staff were deaf themselves and British Sign Language was used in all meetings, communications and even as a main medium for the undergraduate teaching and assessment.



CDS Staff in 2008

¹ In most of the text, the reference is to Deaf people, language and culture.

So how did all this come about and why did it close finally?

The Centre had its roots in the work of Conrad in the 1970s. Jim Kyle who worked closely with Conrad² in his national study of school-leavers with a hearing loss, moved to the School of Education Research Unit in Bristol. This was a fortunate location – probably the only University-funded education research centre in the UK at the time. The environment was completely research focussed and populated by education and language researchers; it was the perfect base for nurturing new ideas.

In 1978, Jim Kyle brought the Conrad questions about reading to the schools and units in the area and over 3 years charted the progress in reading of children aged 6 to 11 years. The work confirmed Conrad's fears: Deaf children were progressing in vocabulary but not in reading comprehension.

What then began to take shape was a multi-faceted attempt to understand better the world of Deaf children, their communication and their community. The "Centre for Deaf Studies" was not named as such until 1984 but the research grants which were vital to its growth began in 1978.

Rather than take a chronological trip through the Centre's existence it is probably more useful to look at the themes which were explored. There are 6 themes which describe the work: Language, Language Acquisition, Community and Culture, Psychology and Learning, Technologies, and the Teaching Programme. All of them had an impact on education, teaching and learning.

Language

In 1978, Bencie Woll, Peter Llewellyn Jones and Gloria Pullen joined the team, ostensibly to discover the skill sets needed for sign language interpreting. What they discovered apart from the low level of

² Conrad, 1979, *The Deaf School Child*, Harper & Row

interpreting performance nationally, was that there was an under-valued language available to Deaf people and that the methods used to teach it were in desperate need of improvement.

A sign language conference in Sweden in 1979 was inspirational and as a result, a series of UK sign language workshops were set up and a group of researchers from different universities began to meet on a regular basis. Bristol organised a conference in Lancaster in 1980 and then hosted the second international sign language conference in 1981.

Work, led mainly by Bencie Woll and later Rachel Sutton-Spence focused on the description of and understanding of British Sign Language. The first book on sign language appeared in 1985 and is still in use. A second key book on sign linguistics followed in 1998. These verified the status of British Sign Language and supported the developing teaching programme. Comparative work on different sign languages (a collection of versions of the Snowman in over 20 sign languages) and on linguistic variation followed, each contributing to a deeper knowledge of the way in which sign language worked.

A specialist strand developed under Rachel Sutton-Spence which celebrated and analysed sign language poetry and literature.

Language Acquisition

Because of on-going work in the research unit in Bristol on hearing children's speech in the 1970s, there was a considerable interest in examining sign language acquisition. The opportunity arose with a group of young Deaf families in Bristol and a longitudinal study of the acquisition of signing by Deaf children developed. Recordings of Deaf children and hearing children in deaf families were made from around 3 months up to 3 years of age. What was demonstrated by Jennifer Ackerman and Lisa McEntee, was that sign language acquisition in Deaf families proceeded at the same pace as spoken language development,

achieving the same functionality. There was no reason to think of Deaf children as language-impaired.

The finding led the team to develop a programme for hearing parents to explain about attention, eye-gaze and early language interaction. The work undertaken in the home, led to the creation of the Family Centre for Deaf children and a pre-school intervention programme which continues to this day.

Community and Culture

First investigations of the Deaf Community began in 1980, when Lorna Allsop met with and interviewed almost all of the Bristol's deaf community. The results emphasised the lower achievements in employment of Deaf people and the lack of opportunity in education beyond school. A national follow-up to the Conrad study in 1984, showed that the school leavers of the mid-1970s did not suddenly surge ahead after school but rather struggled to progress in socio-economic terms.

A large scale lifestyle study of the Deaf community between 1997 and 2002, provided a backdrop to the emergence of a completely new concept: Deafhood. Proposed, researched and promoted by Paddy Ladd, this provided a new set of insights into the ongoing adjustments of Deaf people to life, language and culture. His book in 2003, *Understanding Deaf Culture: in search of Deafhood*, has had a world-wide impact.

Psychology and Learning

One of the questions posed by Conrad, was how do Deaf people think (if they do not use speech processes in memory)? This topic was examined in the 1980s in several studies. Evidence was found for a sign language code (replacing a speech code) but the effects were only really apparent when Deaf people had learned sign language in the first few years of life. Further work on sign language achievement confirmed the lack of an age effect in sign language: that is, since Deaf people (throughout Europe)

tended to acquire sign language later than 5 years old, there was not a simple relation (as there is for spoken language) between age and competence in signing. The work focussed increasingly on sign bilingual education but emphasising the need for families to have the opportunity to learn sign language before the child reached school. Issues around implementing sign bilingualism, were examined by Alys Young who reported on relations between Deaf assistants and classroom teachers.

Further work on the Conrad cohort, in the mid-1990s when they were aged 33-35 years old, found significantly more referrals for mental health problems than seen in the hearing population. A study of Deaf Health in Scotland in the 1990s led to a new proposal from Mary Griggs on the need to study Deaf Wellness and opened a new concern on access to health care. This culminated in a large scale UK health testing programme to determine the outcomes of lack of access. Published in medical journals in 2015, it showed that Deaf people had greater health problems than hearing people particularly evident in hypertension and weight problems.



Participants at CDS Anniversary Conference 2008

Technologies

The development of work on sign language arose from the emergence of easy means of video recording in the late 1970s. It was a central concern of the Centre and led to significant projects in sign language learning, in information provision, in video telecommunications and ultimately in Total Conversation.

The SignWorks project led by Mick Canavan provided videophones to companies and agencies to allow them to communicate at a distance. A new concept of providing sign language information on a remote server, was developed further in a major European project, the WISDOM project. This created the DeafStation news resource, which offered news in BSL every day. This attracted over 6,000 registered users and ran everyday from 2004 until 2011. The SignAware project followed and Christopher John was the central figure in developing sign language teaching online. Examples of the work can be seen at www.signstation.org and mobilesign is an app used by thousands of people as a way to locate over 4,000 signs from their mobile phone.

However, the largest project of the centre was the REACH112 European project prepared from Bristol and involving major companies such as Vodafone, Siemens, France Telecom as well as Deaf organisations across Europe. Between 2010 and 2012, a huge UK pilot was mounted to provide video telecoms to Deaf people, video relay services and a test programme for access to emergency services through video. This was the application of a new standard for video telecommunications: Total Conversation (mandating video, voice and text in calls). Despite the huge success of the pilot programme with nearly a million calls in a 12-month period, national bodies were not in a financial position to maintain the services and we have slipped back into provision of only text relay, everywhere except in Sweden.

The Teaching Programme

In 1981, the first Certificate course in sign language for teachers was set up. The methods used by Deaf tutors drew on the research on sign language and the principle of immersion in the language to be learned. An executive, concentrated course was run for headteachers. By 1987, the Certificate programme was extended to sign language interpreting. In 1991, with European funding, a one-year full-time course was offered extending to a second year Diploma. This framework was also taught to students in Greece, Spain and Portugal. In 1998, the programme became mainstream in the University with a BSc and an MSc being offered.

The first research degree was gained by a Deaf student in 1982 and the programme for PhD flourished in the 1990s. By 2005, there were over 80 students each year in the full-time programme. In 2016, the first Deaf-blind student achieved her PhD and the last student in the programme will graduate in 2017.

The closure of the Centre

From 2001, the Centre Directorship was passed to Deaf staff. This had the major advantage of creating a higher profile for the work of the Centre recognising the influence and capability of the Deaf staff. However, it also implied that the University had to make adjustments at management level to ensure inclusion of the Deaf senior staff in the running of the University. From being a separate (and celebrated) Centre with unique language policies, held at a distance and managed through traditional University methods, the activities of the Centre had to be more integrated into the workings of the Faculty and above.

At the simplest level, interpreters were needed for all meetings, and while the Centre had four in-house interpreting staff, it became apparent that the volume of text materials involved in governance was well beyond the in-house resources for translation to BSL to allow staff to be included. There had to be further calls on University funds, in order to fill the gaps as the Access to Work programme was insufficient. Considerable tension

then arose around the additional costs of running a Centre with so many Deaf staff and students.

Further complications arose with re-structuring from 2003 onwards, as the University embarked on a policy that bigger was better and that small units had to be combined into larger groups. These were “Schools” with single budgets and agreed, similar practices and policies. While traditional subject groups of economics, social policy and sociology, had a rationale for integration, Deaf Studies was a poor fit for Exercise & Sport, Counselling and Learning Disabilities. There was potential synergy with Hearing and Balance Studies but the Audiological aspect was anathema to the principles of Deaf Studies.

What developed was then an uneasy relationship inside the Faculty with the consolidation of Departments removing Deaf Studies from the higher levels of management and simultaneously creating a sense of exclusion and difference.

At the same time, research suffered from the over-engagement of staff in the teaching enterprise which itself was under-resourced. The Research Assessment Exercise, the critical process for allocating funds to the University, focussed largely on journal publications and in a non-text sign language environment, staff struggled to be recognised for the activities and dissemination they were involved in. Most staff were then excluded from submission in this national research assessment process which had a major knock-on effect for internal budgeting for the Centre.

There was then a clear duality: the Centre was praised for its contribution to diversity (in its staff and students) for its relationship to the community (in training interpreters and providing daily BSL news in Deaf Station); but was then denigrated for its limitations in valued research publications and paradoxically for its too close relationship to the community. For example, despite the thousands of users, DeafStation

news had to be abandoned, as it was not a valued activity of a top university.

The complexity of supporting a centre which had no natural affinity with a single discipline, but yet boasted, psychologists, linguists, IT specialists, sociologists, and sign teachers on its staff, created a view in the University that it was not economical and not in its interests to maintain the Centre. Staffing cuts of 10% were proposed across the university and the larger departments drew up the wagons in defensive circles, leaving the smaller units to be picked off.

Government withdrawal of adult education funding across the country, removed a quarter of a million pounds from the Centre's income; the Faculty then decided to cut the undergraduate programme which was the major continuing income of the Centre. There were major street protests and submissions but the plans were pushed through to close the Centre's undergraduate programme by 2013. Pressure on the Masters programme created uncertainty and reduced applications; an attempt to re-negotiate staff contracts, led to the suspension of that income generating course.

The work by staff in attempts to meet the ever changing targets set and the almost annual "independent" reviews, drained the staff of the necessary time and resource to generate large scale grants. In 2012, the last major European grant was completed and in 2013, the last UK grant; all staff had already been offered terms to leave or be made redundant.

The process abandoned a group of higher degree students (who seem to have been forgotten) and there remain Deaf Studies doctoral students in the system, until 2017.

In 2013, the centre's offices were taken over for re-development and the remaining staff were moved. By 2014, this new facility was then closed because of another building re-development.

The centre's archives of video material are still within the University and the SignStation resources and Mobile Sign continue to be available online. Research work shifted to the Deaf Studies Trust in Bristol and courses are still provided to medical students. However, visible Deaf Studies activity inside the University has almost disappeared (2016).

Jim Kyle

Emeritus Professor Deaf Studies, University of Bristol

Former Director of the Centre for Deaf Studies