

Starting with Partnership: designing a Master of Speech Pathology with people with a disability, carers and communities

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Short Abstract

In developing Deakin University's Master of Speech Pathology program, our goal was to prepare students to work inclusively with individuals with disabilities, including those with complex communication needs. While person-centred practice is fundamental to allied health professional training, there has been little exploration of what this means to people with disabilities when it comes to speech pathology- for example, understanding what 'good' communication support looks like and what speech pathologists need to know when working with people with a disability, carers, families and communities. We collaborated with people with lived expertise, including people with complex communication needs who use AAC, people with swallowing and mealtime support needs, and their families, carers and advocates, to consider speech pathology training in the Master of Speech Pathology. We did this through working closely with a small group and broadly consulting with other groups and organisations, including young AAC users, Auslan users, and organizations such as the Association for Children with a Disability, VALID, Women with a Disability Victoria, and AGOSCI. The Design Group analysed these consultations together and identified five themes: Communication Access, Rights of People with Disabilities, Expertise of Individuals with Disabilities, Holistic Perspectives, and Community Connection. These themes were developed into nine Course Principles, which assert the right of people with a communication/ swallowing disability and frame the expectations of speech pathologists who work with them. These are the focus for our course, embedded within course and unit learning outcomes, teaching, practice and assessment for the Master of Speech Pathology.

Long Abstract

Background

Speech pathology has been promoting person-centred practice as a central model for the profession for at least the past 15 years. Person centredness (aka client centredness, patient centredness, and other terms) is a concept that is rooted in the work of Balint, a psychoanalyst from the 1950s who observed that the profession of medicine was a) biologically focussed and did not adequately consider the person as a whole, and b) was 'lop sided' in the distribution of

both power and knowledge between the patient and the doctor (Pilnick, 2023). Thus, person-centred care, at its heart, aims to address reductionism and paternalism, and arguably, ableism. However, there has been little exploration of what person-centred care means from the perspective of people with lived experience of communication disability, carers, families and communities. Additionally, professional 'expertise' is central to professional education, since becoming a professional means claiming autonomy over work and monopoly over a knowledge base (Abbott and Meerabeau, 2020). Allied health professional degrees like speech pathology are often positioned to attract people to the profession by suggesting that students will develop an authoritative knowledge base that they can use to 'change lives'- ie, they will be 'experts', perpetuating the lop sided distribution of power and knowledge that Balint noticed last century. This creates a tension for learning in professional degree courses, with students told on the one hand, that they need to become 'experts' in their chosen field, and on the other, that they need to be centring the expertise, perspectives and knowledges of clients in their practice.

For the Master of Speech Pathology at Deakin, we wanted to develop a course that had a focus on graduating students who were well prepared to work inclusively with people with a disability, including complex disability and complex communication needs. As part of the development, we wanted to consider the idea of 'expertise', and the development of speech pathology students into professionals, through the lens of those with lived experience of communication/ swallowing disability, as well as carers, families, advocates and consumer groups.

A design project was launched at the end of 2023, with a core group of designers using input from a broad range of perspectives develop guiding principles that outline how a graduate of the Master of Speech Pathology at Deakin should practice. Designers included people with disability, their families and supporters including practicing speech pathology professionals, and Deakin University speech pathology academics.

Methods

The Design Group initially met to discuss experiences and perspectives about communication and swallowing, and speech pathology. A broad consultation process was then held with young people who use AAC, Auslan users, and parents, advocates and consumer groups including Association for Children with a Disability, VALID, Women with a Disability Victoria and AGOSCI. While consultations were carried out in various ways, the questions that guided these consultations were broadly:

1. What are some things that speech pathologists need to know when they are working with people with disability and their carers, families and communities?
2. What are some things that speech pathologists need to be able to do to work well with people with disability and their carers, families and communities?
3. What does good support for communication look like?
4. What does good support for eating/drinking look like?

The Design Group met several more times to iteratively analyse and incorporate these perspectives. An approach drawing on collaborative qualitative coding was used, with statements from consultations considered individually by the Design group and discussed in detail, with additional thoughts, relationships and perspectives incorporated. Statements were then placed into groups that demonstrated their focus.

Five statement groups were created, that broadly focussed on the central importance of: Communication access; Rights of people with a disability; Seeing people with disability as experts in their own lives; The big picture of the lives of people with a disability; Connection to communities.

These broad themes were then shaped into draft statements that were again discussed in detail and further constructed by the group, with additional statements added to fully capture the perspectives of the design group and the consultations.

Results

A final set of nine statements were developed by the design group as Course Principles. Each statement asserts the right of people with a communication/ swallowing disability and frames the expectations of speech pathologists who work with them.

The key themes of these principles highlight the importance of the right to communication and safe and enjoyable eating and drinking, of partnership grounded in professional humility, of a whole person and future-focussed, hopeful perspective, and of the collaborative nature of knowledge. The principles highlight the central place of relationship with clients, families, communities, peers and others to professional practice. Without this relationship, which is founded on seeing the inherent humanity of all, profession-specific 'expertise' is useless.

These principles highlight the areas of 'expertise' and hence professional identity for speech pathology students that need to be the focus for our course. They have been used as the basis for developing the course, embedded within course and unit learning outcomes, teaching, practice and assessment for the Master of Speech Pathology at Deakin.

References

Abbott, P., & Meerabeau, L. (2020). Professionals, professionalization and the caring professions. In *The sociology of the caring professions* (pp. 1-19). Routledge.

Pilnick, A. (2023). Reconsidering patient-centred care: Authority, expertise and abandonment. *Health Expectations*, 26(5), 1785-1788.