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Jane Hurst is the chair of the Department of Philosophy and Religion at Gallaudet University, the world's premier university for deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing impaired students. She has taught there for nearly twenty-four years using sign language. She received her PhD from Temple University.

On my campus, a beautiful, bucolic oasis in Washington, D.C., all my students are deaf. This is how they describe themselves in our campus culture, though sometimes with a capital “D,” Deaf. A high percentage of our faculty and staff are also deaf. This is how we view the world, through the eyes of deaf culture. In this environment I, a hearing person, am the one who is disabled. My eyes are sometimes slow to receive the language that is visually presented to me, my brain sometimes does not process fingerspelling well at all, I have trouble reading the various sign language “accents” of some of my students, and when I express myself I am not perfectly fluent. Worse, I think like a hearing person. I can be clueless to the deaf point of view. By virtue of my hearing status, I am always an outsider, I am always the Other, I am always somewhat marginal. In my nearly twenty-four years of teaching deaf students, I have had to become used to a more direct style of communicating than I was used to in the culture of my academic training. To share this acculturation with you, this essay is written in a style that could easily be translated into visual language.

At Gallaudet, deaf people do not consider themselves disabled, but rather as a cultural minority group within the larger hearing society. Gallaudet University sees itself as a deaf parallel to our neighbor Howard University, whose students and faculty are predominantly African-American and whose mission focuses on African-American culture and concerns. Deaf people use visual communication, and where this is readily available there is no disability. Our president, I. King Jordan, who was chosen after the powerful and peaceful weeklong “Deaf President Now” protest in 1988, has said, “Deaf people can do anything except hear,” and the vast majority of deaf people agree with him. With advances in technology, such as TV captioning, Internet messaging, and text messaging, access to clear communication has opened up the wider society to what deaf people can do.

We do have disabled students on campus, and the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSWD) serves their needs. Those who have learning disabilities or have visual impairments are the most commonly served by this office. Students can take tests at the OSWD with extended time or with the size of the text magnified. OSWD also provides close vision interpreting so that students whose visual range is only a few feet have someone to sign the classroom conversation at that distance. Based on my years of teaching in this environment, I have a few practical suggestions for those of you who are new to deaf, hard-of-hearing, or hearing impaired students. First of all, let the student tell you which designation from the above list he or she prefers. Like the terms African-American, black, and Negro, terms that describe hearing loss are culturally loaded and very political. As a hearing person you can stay out of the fray, as well as show respect, by letting each student self-identify.

Second, when I asked my students for their suggestions for hearing teachers of deaf students, they told me that it is most important to stay aware of visual communication in the classroom. A lifetime of habits of communicating only orally may have to be broken. Good visual communication means making eye contact when speaking to someone, and not talking while writing on the board or looking at one's notes. It means being open-minded to the deaf point of view and to the suggestions for better communication that your deaf students might give you.

In deaf culture, avoiding eye contact with someone during a conversation is inconsiderate and can be taken as an insult! I have gotten so used to eye contact in the classroom that when I gave a guest lecture at a hearing university nearby, I was shocked when the entire class broke eye contact and looked down at their notebooks. How had I offended them? Had I lost the whole class at once? I had to laugh at myself, because they were simply taking notes. In a deaf classroom, the lecturer should stop talking while students write notes. For this reason, I usually distribute copies of my own notes to the class to save time waiting for them to write everything down. This is also why deaf students may need hearing students to take notes for them: so you do not have to pause the entire class while your deaf student writes things down.

My third suggestion is to learn to use interpreters wisely. A sign-language interpreter serves as your eyes and hands. He or she will put into sign language your oral communication and voice the signed questions of your deaf students. You speak directly to the deaf person, not the interpreter, even though the deaf person will not be looking at you but at your "hands," the interpreter. In subjects such as religious studies, which are based not simply on a presentation of facts but are highly nuanced and abstract, it is important to have an interpreter who can work at this level. Students miss a great deal if the interpreter does not understand the subject.

For some students with hearing loss, interpreters may be useless if the student does not know sign language, but instead depends on lip-reading or other visual communication systems. Furthermore, not all signed communication is the same. Some students prefer American Sign Language (ASL), the native language of deaf people, which has its own grammar and syntax quite different from English, while others prefer Pidgin Signed English, which uses features of ASL but is based on English grammar and syntax. Still others might prefer directly signed English, which includes every article, pronoun, and verb ending. Because of this complexity, it is important to be sure that your student has the appropriate communication in the classroom.

Fourth, be aware that students can have multiple disabilities, and that you must do your best to accommodate all of these. I will not go into depth here, but will just point out that this is important to keep in mind.

Fifth, I suggest that you see the presence of disabled students in your classroom as an opportunity to develop mental flexibility on your part. You will have to change some habits, drop some assumptions, and adapt your teaching style to reach these students. What you did in the past in a classroom with homogeneous communication will certainly have to be adapted for those with different communication modes. This is a wonderful chance to rethink your approach to teaching. I have found, for example, that the professorial habits of speech that involve long sentences and a torrent of words to express a point do not work well in visual communication. Again and again I ask myself, what am I really trying to say? Can I express this more effectively by clarifying my own mental apparatus? Can I find clear examples that carry all the levels of meaning that I want my class to understand?

My final suggestion comes from the existential issues raised for me as a college professor who has devoted her professional career to teaching deaf, hard-of-hearing, and hearing impaired students. This is not what I expected to be doing! I was prepared for a traditional academic career, but the exigencies of the job market, and I must admit the challenge of the situation, led me to Gallaudet. I have not regretted this commitment, though I have experienced plenty of conflicting emotions about my career and my students. I have had to keep learning, which sometimes my aging self resists. For example, one visually impaired student would sign to me and point his finger within a foot of my face when he was signing the word “you.” This seemed so rude to me until I realized that he had no depth perception, and had no idea how close his sign was to my bifocals. Still, I had to overcome my annoyance each time we talked.

As I teach what are perceived by the mainstream world as “disabled students,” I have learned to go beyond conventional ways of thinking about the study of religion, especially the use of language. For example, I focus more on key concepts than a barrage of information, which can

be visually exhausting in sign language, and is often better understood in written form. In the classroom, I use speech and sign simultaneously, which keeps my brain synapses humming and is mentally very challenging. Every abstract concept I introduce must be accompanied by many examples and interactions with my students to be sure they have understood. Here the basic interactive classroom approach, with much focus on discussion and small group work, will be helpful.

For example, in introducing the concept of *karma*, my students easily grasp the cause and effect nature of karma since the sign itself adapts the sign for “influence” or “cause” moving away from and then toward the signer. At this point someone usually asks, “But isn’t karma punishment for the things you have done wrong in the past?” But the sign for punishment is quite different, and does not show a clear cause and effect relationship. Deaf students from Buddhist countries have an input here, since some of them have been taught this concept as children. Now we have an opportunity to come up with examples, and analyze them applying the sign concept. But we must take the time to find out where the students are coming from, rather than simply lecturing on the subject.

Most importantly, the flexibility required as I teach students who are so different from me in their experience has raised the question of who we truly are beyond our physical presence in this world. Is there a commonality that we share beyond our perceptions and self-understanding as deaf or hearing, blind or sighted, disabled or able-bodied? Can we extend this to understanding differences across the boundaries of race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation? I’m going to ask my students these questions on Monday. I expect a lively discussion.