# Using Adult Learning Principles to Foster the Transition of Individuals with Hearing Impairments

John L Luckner, Thomas W Sileo, Harvey Rude

**Abstract**

Persons who are deaf or who have hearing impairments experience difficult school-to-community transitions. In this article, barriers to successful transition are identified and adult learning principles designed to facilitate student development are presented. In addition, specific recommendations for professionals who work with adolescents and young adults with hearing impairments are discussed.

**Using Adult Learning Principles to Foster the Transition of Individuals with Hearing Impairments**

Research indicates that young adults with hearing impairments have difficulty making the transition from school to community settings, employment and post-secondary education programs. Bullis, Bull, Johnson and Kittrell (1990) showed that in comparison to a group of peers without hearing impairments, persons with hearing impairments (a) showed higher unemployment rates; (b) were more likely to seek counseling to address personal problems and (c) were significantly less engaged in personal and/or professional development activities (e.g., going to school, working full or part-time). Other studies indicate that persons with hearing impairments face comparatively poorer employment conditions than their counterparts without hearing impairments, including over-representation in blue collar occupations, lower earning power and significantly less mobility (Schroedel, 1976; Walter & Macleod-Gallinger, 1989).

Research conducted by Freeburg, Sendelbaugh, and Bullis (1991) suggest possible explanations for this inequity. They identified obstacles faced by adolescents and adults with hearing impairments in school-to-community transition. These included the following: (a) difficulties with English-based communication, (b) lack of knowledge regarding procedures to find employment and other services available to the general public, (c) lack of resources providing transition services and training programs accessible to deaf youth, (d) inadequate work experiences, problem solving skills and academic achievement. These findings suggest that educational and community support programs inadequately address the transition needs of youth with hearing impairments.

The purpose of this paper is to address the school-to-community transition needs of young adults with hearing impairments. We suggest that the integration of adult learning principals (e.g., Brookfield, 1986; Jarvis, 1983) by educators and service providers will facilitate the transition process and assist in the development of autonomy in adult roles in community settings.

**Transition for Students with Hearing Impairments**

The Education of the Handicapped Act Amendments of 1990 (P.L. 101-476) defines transition as a coordinated set of activities for students designed with an outcome-oriented process that promotes movement from school to post-school activities. The legislation requires Individualized Education Programs (IEP) to address transition goals that enable students to function in valued adult roles. Although transition services are mandated by law, they do not occur automatically. Transition services necessitate (a) coordinated planning among trained personnel who have an interdisciplinary focus and appropriate communication and problem solving skills (Weisenstein & Elrod, 1987); (b) significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of educators, parents and other family members, vocational rehabilitation and adult service systems representatives and employers (Weisenstein & Elrod, 1987; Stark & Karan, 1987) and (c) common definitions, policies and procedures that facilitate the identification of persons with disabilities across education, rehabilitation and other community agency programs (Sileo, Rude, & Luckner, 1988).

In order to plan effectively for students' school-to-community transition, an individualized transition plan (ITP) should be developed two to four years prior to graduation or school exit (P. Bates, 1986). This time period enables students to receive intensive vocational/community living instruction and to access services from adult agencies.

When planning for students with hearing impairments, educational objectives beyond the frequently used scope-and-sequence charts should be considered. Skills, strategies and information should be selected based on their importance to effective participation in post-secondary vocational and community environments. Development of independent and responsible behaviors would be enhanced with training opportunities and curricula focusing on the

following four domains: vocational, leisure/recreational, community and domestic (Brown et al., 1991).

In addition, students with hearing impairments will require many community-related skills that cannot be learned in classrooms (St. Peter, 1987), such as locating and using banks, hospitals, insurance companies, interpreter services, telephone relays and government offices. Collaboration with a variety of school and adult service providers (Idol, Paolucci-Whitcomb, & Nevin, 1986) will facilitate a smooth transition from school-to- community or post-secondary settings.

**Teacher Training Programs in Deaf Education**

Research reported by Luckner (in press) indicates that most teacher training programs in deaf education emphasize elementary education; training in secondary transition planning or in collaborating/consulting with related/adult service providers is not provided. In fact, pre-service teachers typically do not work with adolescents or participate in secondary-level practicum experiences. Furthermore, the focus of educational programs in deaf education tends to be on the development of speech and language skills to the exclusion of functional life skills (Luckner, 1990). The result is that many students with hearing impairments fail to develop the attitudes, strategies and skills necessary for daily living in our complex society (Astin, 1975; Fairweather & Shaver, 1991). Consequently, pre-service and in-service training is needed for professionals in the areas of self-determination, consultation, collaboration and transition.

Instructional approaches based on adult learning principles provide a framework that may assist educators and service providers to address each of these areas. Following is a discussion of adult learning principles that are applicable to transition planning for students with hearing impairments.

**Adult Learning Principles**

Adults have the capacity and are eager to learn new information and skills. On-going conceptual and technological changes mandate continuous educational processes for survival; we no longer assume that a fixed body of knowledge, once mastered, will serve for life. Lifelong learning and continuous personal growth are major societal issues. Education is one means by which they can satisfy this basic need (Jarvis, 1983).

Adults learn best when new information builds upon current knowledge and past experiences. The selection and presentation of transition options should approximate students' levels of understanding and focus on the development of skills that facilitate independent learning and learning in concert with others. Information may need to be presented through a wide range of structured symbolic presentations (consistent with the learner's needs) and in a variety of contexts (modeling, role-play, simulations) in order to ensure students' understanding (Cranton, 1989).

Adults enter learning situations with personal goals and objectives that must be considered when designing instructional activities. Instruction of, and interaction with students must facilitate autonomy and self-direction, and allow for personal control in establishing appropriate transition-related goals. Activities to facilitate goal attainment should take place in an environment that ensures success (Bagnall, 1988). The process requires extensive negotiation among parents, service providers and students to identify relevant and useful instructional activities that complement students' educational needs, characteristics, and environmental contexts (T. Bates, 1986).

Adults learn best when they feel the need to learn and when they have a sense of responsibility for what, why, and how they learn. Defining goals and developing initiative to achieve those goals are essential skills for personal and professional success. Discovering ways to help learners with hearing impairments identify what they want to learn and then identify resources to gain the specified knowledge/skills is imperative.

Adults are motivated to learn if they participate actively in the learning process and have opportunities to apply current learning experiences. Appropriate learning activities offer students the opportunity to practice, revise and master concepts by applying newly acquired skills and competencies to novel situations (Cross, 1979). Students can be guided to analyze real work contexts and create alternative ways to test new knowledge in real world situations. Effective instruction is student-centered, is predicated on active learner involvement and involves on-going interaction between learners and instructors. Contextual experiences (problem solving, simulations, apprenticeships, real life experiences) provide connective bridges to facilitate students' integration and application of new material.

Adult cognitive and affective styles require a variety of pedagogical techniques. Students need opportunities to experiment and to develop problem-solving skills in real life situations. Cognitive and affective processes enable learners to (a) organize information and construct meaning; (b) address the emotional aspects of their ideas and values;

(c) take risks and ultimate responsibility for their learning and (d) identify with a learning group. Students, therefore, must be encouraged to articulate facts, concepts, theories and principles, and to apply this information to personal and local contexts as bases for analyzing existing practices. Additionally, students need to develop effective communication skills with peers with and without hearing impairments (Cranton, 1989). Instructional materials and assignments must be individualized in context and pedagogy to complement students' diverse styles as they approach tasks of varying complexity.

### Discussion

Decisions made for or by persons with hearing impairments during transition periods may well affect the rest of their lives. The long-term goal of facilitative learning is to nurture persons who view themselves as proactive, self-directed, and empowered. These individuals should be engaged in a continuous re-creation of their personal relationships, vocational goals and social circumstances, rather than in a reactive position, buffeted by uncontrollable forces or circumstance (Brookfield, 1986). Evidence suggests that individuals with hearing impairments are as intellectually capable as hearing individual; they can manage the cognitive demands of a work situation and tend to be rated as good and even superior workers. Yet, in general, they do not acquire the educational training or access to adult services that would promote personal and professional success.

As we look toward the future, more than half of all new jobs created by the year 2000 will require post-secondary training (Johnston & Packer, 1987). Unfortunately, research studies show that high numbers of students with hearing impairments withdraw from college before graduation: 20 percent drop out during the first year; cumulatively, up to 50 percent drop out after the first year (U.S. General Accounting Office, 1986). Greater assistance must be provided to individuals with hearing-impairments to develop the attitudes, skills and strategies needed to find personal and professional satisfaction.

The following recommendations are made for professionals who work with adolescents and young adults with hearing impairments:

1. There is a need to develop effective assessment and intervention materials for persons with hearing impairments.
2. Educational programs should provide instruction that allows students to acquire basic skills and to build more advanced academic and/or functional skills from that foundation (Bullis et al., 1990).
3. Teachers of students with hearing impairments should be prepared to work with secondary students by sharing and modeling adult learning principles.
4. Teachers should receive instruction in the areas of consultation, collaboration and transition planning.

## References


Astin, A. W. *Preventing Students from Dropping Out. San Francisco*: Jossey-Bass, 1975.

Bagnall, R. G. "Reconceptualizing and revaluing distance education through the perspective of self-direction," in D. Stewart and J. S. Daniel eds., *Developing Distance Education*. Oslo: International Council for Distance Education, 1988.

Bates, P. *Ilinois transition project: Transition plan development for special education students in Illinois public schools.* Springfield, IL: Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities, 1986.

Bates, T. "Computer assisted learning or communications: Which way for information technology in distance education?" *paper* presented at the Distance Education Conference, Vancouver, B.C., May, 1986.

Brookfield, S. D. *Understanding and Facilitating Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1986.

Brown, L., Schwarz, P., Udvari-Solner, A., Kampschroer, E. F., Johnson, F.,Jorgensen,J., & Gruenwald, L. "How much time should students with severe intellectual disabilities spend in regular education classrooms and elsewhere?" in *Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*, 16(1), 39-47, 1991.

Bullis, M., Bull, B., Johnson, P., & Kittrell, G. *School-to-community transition experiences of hearing impaired adolescents and young adults in the Northwest*. Monmouth, OR: Teaching Research Division, Western Oregon State College, 1990.

Cranton, P. *Planning Instruction for Adult Learners*. Toronto: Wall and Thompson, 1989.

Cross, P. "Adult learners: Characteristics, needs, and interests," in R. E. Peterson, ed., *Lifelong Learning in America*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1979.

Fairweather, J. S., & Shaver, D. S. "Making the transition to post-secondary education and training," in *Exceptional Children*, 57(3), 264-270, 1991.

Freeburg, J., Sendelbaugh, J., & Bullis, M. "Barriers in school-to-community transition," in *American Annals of the Deaf*, 136(1), 38-47, 1991.

Idol, L., Paolucci-Whitcomb, P., & Nevin, A. *Collaborative consultation*. Rockville, MD: Aspen, 1986.

Jarvis, P., *Adults and Continuing Education: Theory and Practice*. New York: Nichols, 1983.

Johnston, W. B., & Packer, A. H. *Workforce 2000: Work and Workers for the 21st Century*. Indianapolis, IN: Hudson Institute, 1987.

Luckner, J. L. "Preparing teachers to work with adolescent students who are hearing impaired: A survey of training programs," in *Teacher Education and Special Education, in press.*

Luckner, J. L. "Using problem-solving activities to facilitate the language development of hearing-impaired students," in *The ACEHI Journal/La Revue ACEDA*, 16(2/3), 101-109, 1990.

Schroedel, J. G. "Variables related to the attainment of occupational status of deaf adults," *unpublished doctoral dissertation*, New York University (University Microfilms No. 77-16447), 1976.

Sileo, T. W., Rude, H. A., & Luckner, J. L. "Collaborative consultation: Its interface with transition programming for handicapped youth," in *Education and Training in Mental Retardation*, 23(4), 333-339, 1988.

Stark, J., & Karan, O. "Transition services for early adult age individuals with severe mental retardation," in R. N. Ianacone & R. A. Stodden eds., *Transition Issues and Directions* , 91-110. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children, 1987.

St. Peter, S. M. "Training in natural environments to minimize the handicaps of students with severe impairments," in A. Rotatori, M. M. Banbury, & R. A. Fox eds., *Issues in Special Education*. Palo Alto, CA: Mayfield, 1987.

U.S. General Accounting Office. *Deaf education: Costs and student characteristics at federally assisted programs (Report No. GAO/HRD-86-64BR)*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986.

Walter, G. G., & MacLeod-Gallinger, J. *Employment attainments of deaf adults one and ten years after graduation from high school*. Rochester, NY: Rochester Institute of Technology, 1989.

Weisenstein, G. R., & Elrod, G. F. "Transition services for adolescent age individuals with mild mental retardation," in R. N. Ianacone & R. A. Stodden eds.,*Transition Issues and Directions* , 38-48. Reston, VA: Council for Exceptional Children, 1987.

Andrew, a three and a half year old is learning to press the appropriate switch to activate a toy.

*John L Luckner is a professor in the Division of Special Education at the University of Northern Colorado where he coordinates the development and implementation of the deaf education teach training programs.*

*Tom W Sileo is a professor and chair of the Department of Special Education at the University of Hawaii-Manoa where he is integrally involved in the development and implementation of the special education teacher training programs on campus and through distance delivery.*

*Harvey A Rude is a professor in the Division of Special Education and associate dean in the College of Education at the University of Northern Colorado where directs the School for the Study of Teaching and Teacher Education.*