A Brief Guide for Speakers Addressing the Bind and Deaf

Recently I taught a week long course for blind students on London's Georgian history and ordinary life during the period, including living life disabled. Whilst the majority of my students had become blind during their adult life, a significant number had been blind since childhood and were also deaf.

Whilst I had made preparations to have what I hoped would be interesting material available, including objects, eighteenth century books and textiles, I hadn't quite taken on board various aspects of delivery and the pace of our studies. This brief guide will, I hope, help any other speaker intending to address a blind and deaf group. The terms blind and deaf are used here, as I have been contacted by blind and deaf people by email and asked to use these terms, rather than 'impaired', which is less favoured by the students themselves. Also, by issuing this guide, I am not claiming to be any sort of expert at all, just to pass on the things I learned, and wish I had known at the beginning of the course! This is also a work in progress and if anyone wants to contribute to it, as either a speaker/teacher or a student they can always email me lucyinglis77@gmail.com

1) If your group includes deaf members, you may be expected to wear a transmitter fob around your neck. These usually just switch on and off. Keep it away from your mobile phone. Members with compatible hearing aids will also wear one. Often, they will play with them during the talk. Don't get distracted by this, if there's a problem, they or their guide will tell you. (Pro tip: remember to switch your transmitter off during any tea breaks and when you are in the loo....)

2) Be aware of your venue. If in a lecture theatre, make sure those using the transmitter are in range (near the front), even if guides have to sit nearer the back. This also applies to sitting in the round. Be aware that some students may not want to be separated from their guides, so just suggest it rather than enforce it. If someone can't hear deaf or not, you'll soon know about it because they will tell you.

3) Any disabled group is likely to be from a more diverse range of backgrounds and knowledge bases than your typical lecture audience. If your subject is specialist, speak assuming a basic level of knowledge, but a high level of interest and ability.

4) Introduce yourself at the very beginning. Hopefully, your group will be wearing clear name tags. The group does not know what you look like, which is not necessarily important, but it gives them no yardstick on which to feel acquainted with you before you all engage with the material. Where is your regional accent from? How old are you? Where do you live now? Are you married? Have children? Did you have a shocking journey to the venue? Any tiny anecdote will break the ice. Be comfortable with dispensing a little bit of something about yourself, it will make all the difference to the atmosphere in the room.

5) Speak slowly and clearly. I know, as a speaker, you will think you already speak slowly and clearly. I can almost guarantee you will have vocal nuances that are difficult for the deaf, such as closing your sentences abruptly, or swallowing the odd word. Almost all of these aren't a problem and will add to your appeal as an individual, but only as long as you SLOW DOWN. This, in turn, will dramatically affect the amount of material you can expect to deliver. Work on approximately 2/3rds of your usual amount but have supplementary up your sleeve for Q&A.

6) Expect to be interrupted. Guide dogs are still just dogs, though they are brilliant too. They sigh, yawn, stretch, grunt and gurgle like any other dog. Plus, disabled students often invest a huge amount of time, effort and emotion into getting to a talk or lecture. If they have a guide, then that's double the effort. Your talk is important to them, as is their often extensive preparation. It is absolutely usual to be interrupted with shouts of, 'I CANNOT HEAR YOU,' or requests for clarification of a point or a name. This is not bad manners, and it will teach you valuable things about both your delivery and the quality of information you are imparting in a way that may be glossed over in an ordinary lecture.

7) Don't be worried if you see students with their eyes closed, not looking at you or even with their head resting on arms while you are speaking. They are all listening.

8) If someone stops you, either by interruption or by raising their hand, stop speaking and identify them. For example: Ruth would like to ask a question, Ruth go ahead. Ruth will then ask her question. Bear in mind that people using the transmitter are now sitting, effectively, in silence. Most are very patient with this, but be aware of the length of time the question is taking, and if necessary, reassert yourself as speaker. In ALL CASES, repeat the question, cutting it down to the shortest version. For example: Ruth is asking whether gin really was such a scourge amongst the poorer classes in the eighteenth century, and my answer is x. This maintains context and flow for the deaf members of the group.

9) Don't fret about your language. Mincing around phrases such as, 'When we look at,' or 'You might have heard about,' is obvious and the vast majority of your students and audience will use these phrases themselves without any second thoughts.

10) If you can, take along at least one object you can allow to be passed around. Blind people are exceptionally careful when they handle things are they are more reliant on it for experience. They also gain a huge amount from it and it will elevate their experience of your teaching.

11) If you are reading or using notes, which is absolutely fine, do it with your HEAD UP. My students told me they could tell whenever I dropped my head to read a passage or quote. So I stopped doing it. It is a very good lesson for all speakers.