

Language in the Workplace for students with intellectual disability: research methodology

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Introduction

This is a short report on the collaborative research project being conducted by the Language in the Workplace team based at the School of Linguistics and Applied Language Studies, Victoria University of Wellington and the Eastern Institute of Technology (EIT) in Hawkes Bay. The project focuses on the communication skills required to enhance vocational success for students with intellectual disability.

Polyventure is a two-year work and life skills programme at EIT Hawkes Bay. The course aims to enhance students' quality of life and enable them to live and work more independently in the community. The emphasis is on the interpersonal and social skills which are central to students managing well in the workplace culture, and to their ongoing work success. Goals are individualised to help each student gain greater independence in their particular workplace.

Workplaces that employ people with intellectual disability are often places that involve relatively little conversation on the work floor: they are businesses which are largely engaged in practical tasks. Nevertheless, all the employers we interviewed mentioned good interpersonal and communication skills as important in employees, and some commented on the need for a friendly manner and a sense of humour.

Typically students can perform their work tasks well, but have difficulty with the social communication which is so vital to success in the workplace. For example, Sharon, a young woman working part time at a rest home, was too shy to look at or greet staff on arrival. This was mistaken as rudeness and Sharon's relationship with staff began on a negative footing each day. Ability to perform work tasks is just the tip of the iceberg in terms of success at work, with social and interpersonal skills underpinning the structure as predictors of success. Vivienne Riches states that

correct worker behaviours and practices involve a number of social and interpersonal skills and early intervention in these areas, either in conjunction with or before the worker transferred them to the work environment was found to be more effective than attempting to correct problems on the workfloor itself (1995: 9).

Similarly, at the ASENZ (Association of Supported Employment NZ) conference in 1996, David Hagnar noted that in order to assist people to be successful in the workplace, social and interpersonal skills must be addressed, including the skills of learning names, joining in small talk,

initiating appropriate and successful interactions, and taking part in key customs of the workplace such as involvement in celebrations and social events.

So, for example, Sean, a young man who worked at a car wreckers, was deeply offended by his co-workers swearing, but was unable to politely ignore it. His attempts to point out the error of their ways to his fellow workers were met with ridicule and ostracism. Clearly, there is ample scope for research focused on modes of social communication in workplaces where people with intellectual disability typically find employment.

Aims of the research

The Language in the Workplace/EIT Project has two overall objectives:

- (i) to identify the characteristics of successful communication between people who work together;
- (ii) to develop effective strategies to assist students with intellectual disability in the transition to work.

Methodological issues

Workplaces likely to employ students with intellectual disability were approached through Supported Employment Hawkes Bay, an employment agency working exclusively with people with any disability. Volunteers in workplaces were asked to record normal everyday talk at work for approximately ten days, and to collect a range of different types of social interactions that typically occurred as part of their working week. Those making the recordings were asked to include greetings, farewells, break time socialising, small meetings, informal work-related discussions and conversations, and any other social interactions in the workplace.

Persuading businesses to participate

Persuading workplaces to participate in the project was a real challenge. The two workplaces approached initially were supportive of the project's goals in principle, but after some consideration did not agree to record data; they expressed considerable reservations about the recording process. In response, we reviewed our approach and decided to address more directly the concerns of these employers, and ensure that all those potentially involved had a good understanding of the project's goals and direction.

Marianne McLeod, the research assistant from Supported Employment Hawkes Bay identified the range of concerns expressed by employers, and a new information sheet was produced to address these. The information sheet was designed in question and answer form and in accessible language, as follows.

• *What is the project about?*

We are looking at what makes for successful communication at work so we can teach students with intellectual disability the specific skills to assist

them to have a better chance of success in the employment. This project is part of the larger Language in the Workplace research being conducted by Victoria University in Wellington.

• *Why are we doing this?*

We have found that students can usually perform their work tasks, but have difficulty with the social communication that is so vital to success in the workplace.

• *What's in it for your workplace?*

You will gain knowledge about communication in your workplace. You will be involved in a valuable social research project. If you wish your involvement can be publicly acknowledged.

• *What are we actually asking you to do?*

We want you to record about 10 days of your everyday typical social communication with a co-worker who works or who may work alongside a student with a disability.

• *What happens to the recordings?*

First of all you can edit anything out. The tapes will then be sent to Victoria University for analysis. The analysis doesn't focus on the precise words you use at work, but rather on the kinds of topics people talk about, when they talk, and what sorts of greetings, farewells and small talk they use.

• *What about confidentiality?*

The research team can give you an absolute guarantee of confidentiality, anonymity, and security for the recorded material. So the person recording doesn't need to worry about swearing, saying things about others, or even running down the boss! And of course the person recording can edit out anything they wish.

• *What happens afterwards?*

We hope to record social interactions in a range of workplaces and use the information to teach specific social communication skills to help students with intellectual disability succeed at work. We'll give feedback to you and people who have taken part just as soon as we have the results of the analysis.

Six further workplaces were then approached and the project outlined and discussed using the new information sheet. Two workplaces agreed to take part and further meetings were set up to explain the recording procedures in detail. It is worth noting that even the discussions with the workplaces that did not agree to participate were enlightening, and the research assistant gathered useful data on communication problems associated with people with intellectual disability in a variety of employment settings.

Selecting suitable workplaces

Students with intellectual disability find employment through Supported Employment agencies in a range of workplaces including garden centres, supermarkets, food outlets, rest homes, and factories; they may work as cleaners, in maintenance, engraving, in stores and salesplaces. Selection of possible businesses to use in the project was constrained by a number of factors.

- Almost all businesses expressed apprehension about taping, not only because they found the very idea threatening, but also because they felt that taping would not give the full communication picture.
- In many businesses, a large part of the typical daily communication involved members of the public and these businesses anticipated that gaining consent for short interactions would be difficult.
- Some workplaces, such as factories, were too noisy.
- Other businesses employed such large numbers that recording at break times would not provide transcribable material.
- Some businesses involved minimal conversation or people worked alone.

Data collection

Despite the problems identified and discussed above, data is currently being collected from two workplaces; and a third has agreed to record material later in the year. The first site is a medium-sized garden shop in Havelock North village selling a range of garden plants and equipment and employing four people, including one student who has an intellectual disability. The second workplace is a three-person seedling nursery business which provides work for one student with an intellectual disability, one day per week.

These workplaces were very aware of the constraints of the recording process, and the fact that we were collecting only a small sample of their "normal" interactional patterns. At one workplace, two women noted that they often altered their interactional style when the student was present, since they avoided talking about personal relationships in case they upset or offended him. The recording process also drew their attention to the fact that he rarely initiated conversation, and although he generally responded to conversation, he would sometimes appear to completely ignore statements, directions or questions.

Conclusion

On the basis of the interviews with employers as well as the work already undertaken by the LWP Project (see Holmes, this volume) analysis of the recorded data from specific workplaces will identify some of the characteristics of successful communication such as:

Language in the Workplace Symposium

- greetings and partings
- politeness strategies e.g. appropriate response to 'How are you?'
- small talk – how much, where, when, topics
- humour

This analysis will enable us to develop effective strategies to assist students with intellectual disability in the transition to work.

Reference

- Holmes (this volume). Victoria University's Language in the Workplace Project: Goals, Scope and Methodology.
- Riches, Vivienne C. 1996. (2nd edition). *Everyday Social Interaction*. Sydney: MacLennan and Petty.