



## Service Learning in Speech and Language Therapy

A range of service learning modules are available at NUI Galway whereby students undertake accredited activity of specific relevance to their chosen subject for the benefit of the community

### Teaching Context

<b>Subject</b>	Aphasia Outreach Programme
<b>Department</b>	Speech and Language Therapy
<b>Participants</b>	4 <sup>th</sup> Year Undergraduate Speech and Language
<b>Pedagogy</b>	Service learning / community based learning
<b>Method</b>	Students are trained to be conversation partners for people with aphasia living in the local community
<b>Participants</b>	25-30 students
<b>Hours</b>	7hrs conversation partner training 8hrs tutorial support 10-12 hours in the community
<b>Credits</b>	Pass/Fail
<b>Materials</b>	Reflective logs Research, design and development of posters Presentation of OT/SLT student conference
<b>Assessment</b>	100% Coursework involving: Completion of conversation partner training Weekly one hour visits to conversation partner Submission of weekly logs of visits Participation in fortnightly tutorials Group work – poster research, design and production. Presentations at the OT/SLT student conference
<b>Length</b>	1 semester
<b>Community Partners</b>	People living with aphasia after acquired brain injury in the Galway region Members of the SLT department PCCC, Newcastle Rd. Galway CONNECT, London.
<b>Optional/Mandatory</b>	Mandatory
<b>First Piloted</b>	2006/2007

### Introduction

Service learning seeks to reinvigorate the civic mission of higher education and instil in students a sense of social responsibility and civic awareness. It is a pedagogical tool that encourages students to learn and explore issues vital to society inside and outside the classroom. Students learn from engaging with communities by active participation.

#### The Aphasia Outreach Programme

Aphasia is an acquired communication disorder caused by brain damage. It is characterised by an impairment of language modalities speaking, listening, reading and writing (Chapey, 2001). One of the most disabling consequences of aphasia is the way that it excludes the person from conversation (Rayner and Marshall 2003). Having successfully completed the CONNECT model ([www.ukconnect.org](http://www.ukconnect.org)) of conversation partner training 4<sup>th</sup> year Speech and Language Therapy (SLT) students are paired and matched with a person with aphasia living in the local community. People with aphasia can use preserved cognitive and social abilities to participate in conversation, in spite of their linguistic impairments.

Students visit their conversation partner on a weekly basis for 10 weeks and these visits take place in a variety of settings including: the conversation partners homes, nursing homes and the Irish Wheelchair Association. These visits aim to reduce the social consequences of aphasia and promote social communication within natural contexts (Simmons-Mackie, 2000) for the person with aphasia and the students.

This Aphasia outreach module aims to:

- Facilitate students understanding of the nature and role of conversation in everyday life and the impact of aphasia on conversation;
- Develop a range of conversation strategies which help, get the message in, get the message out and acknowledge the person behind the aphasia;
- Encourage students to apply critical reflection on personal conversation and develop skills to deepen and extend conversation;
- Facilitate students reflection on their own life experience and how they might use their personal resources during conversation with a person living with aphasia;
- Introduce service-learning as pedagogy through lecture, discussion, group work and reading.

## Student Benefit

Exploring aphasia through civic engagement links community service with academic study. The weekly visits and conversational experiences provide the students with enhanced learning opportunities related to their theoretical material. Weekly reflective logs and fortnightly tutorials involving individual and group discussions facilitate the students' reflection and learning. Students deepen their understanding of aphasia and become more aware of how society views communication disability. Comments from students who have participated in this module include:

*"I learned about the profound effect that aphasia has on the person and on the family unit."*

*"I began to see beyond the disability and to learn that aphasia is only a small part of the individual's life."*

*"I learnt how to be resourceful and find new ways of communicating."*

*"The learning we have gained through these visits will be immensely beneficial to our future work as clinicians."*

Students participating in the aphasia outreach module unanimously recommended that service learning be embedded into the core curriculum of the Speech and Language Therapy degree programme. This is reflected in their comments during the evaluation of the module:

*"It was difficult but rewarding."*

*"I now have a greater understanding of the complexities of an individual's life with aphasia."*

*"Gained valuable experience in practicing how to facilitate communication with clients with aphasia."*

*"Valuable learning experience to allow me to take clients' experiences, attitudes and beliefs on board and not to see them as just in terms of an impairment."*

*"It is hoped that as the Aphasia Outreach Programme was a positive learning experience it will continue for years to come."*

*"Service learning module should continue to be implemented in the speech and language therapy degree programme."*

## Community Benefit

The aphasia outreach programme provides a new model of Speech and Language Therapy service delivery for people with aphasia. As the Speech and Language Therapy Manager in Primary Continuing & Community Care (PCCC), Galway notes *"adult Speech and Language Therapy services are a scarce resource and particularly difficult to provide for clients several years post stroke...the conversation partner programme is a new model of engaging with clients by providing a primary care service in their own environment...it has received a positive response from clients and their families"*.

Students noted that their conversation partners' confidence and willingness to participate in conversation improved over the course of their visits. All of the people with aphasia who participated in this module to date have requested that they be included in the aphasia outreach programme again in the next academic year.

## Academic Comment

"One of the core principles in the speech and language therapy department at NUI Galway is to work in partnership with all stakeholders in the planning and implementation of the course curriculum" (Rena Lyons Course Director). The implementation of the conversation partner programme involves collaboration between six sets of stakeholders and this collaboration provides a valuable contribution to student's education about their role within society and about the daily challenges faced by people living with Aphasia. The values of respect, communication, creativity, openness and inclusion are crucial to becoming a conversational partner and this module gives student's the opportunity to engage in interactions and reflective learning which highlights these values.

This service learning module provides the first evidence of Irish students being trained as conversation partners for people living with aphasia in the Galway region. The evaluation of this work will contribute to the literature on training students to become conversation partners for people living with aphasia. Collaboration with the Community Knowledge Initiative (CKI) team at NUI Galway, the Galway Speech and Language Therapy department in the PCCC and CONNECT London was fundamental to researching, designing and implementing the aphasia outreach module. 4<sup>th</sup> year Speech and Language Therapy students invested their knowledge and energy into their local community and they made a real difference to the lives of people living with aphasia. The students were given an opportunity to develop civic awareness and learn from people living with a communication disability. Evaluation of this service learning module indicates that it has benefited all stakeholders. We have embedded service learning as a core element into our curricula in the Speech and Language Therapy department. We look forward to continued links with our community colleagues and future aphasia outreach programmes.