

Talking loud and clear

Sean Pert shares a community initiative to set up trans and non-binary voice and communication groups involving student SLTs

ILLUSTRATION BY Daria Skrybchenko

While attending a discussion event at Manchester Pride in 2015, I was astonished to hear that Manchester had no integrated care pathway for trans individuals. The city, while famous for its diversity and Gay Village, had no one-stop location for trans people to seek support.

Paul Martin, OBE, Chief Executive of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Trans (LGBT) Foundation, a charity in central Manchester, explained that trans people often had to travel to different cities to access gender identity clinics (GICs), and even then, waiting lists were long and services frequently limited. Paul commented that service users had highlighted speech and language therapy as particularly challenging to access, while SLTs often reported feeling that they did not have the skills to work with trans individuals. I introduced myself and asked how I and my students at the University of Manchester might help on a voluntary basis.

Trans people are a minority group facing severe discrimination. Even within the relatively accepting 'gay scene', trans people and their needs have been poorly understood.

Almost half of trans people under 26 reported that they had attempted suicide (McNeil et al. 2012). Discrimination and violence towards trans people is common and on the increase, almost trebling between 2011-2015 (Yeung, 2016), although '...trans hate crime ranks alongside disability hate as the most underreported' (Broadstock, 2015: 8).

The LGBT Foundation recently changed its name to reflect the need to be inclusive and provide support to the trans community. Taking a lead from trans people themselves is vital to ensure that services are developed and shaped according to their needs. It was this community-led ethos that has helped to develop a dynamic trans programme in Manchester.

Trans programme coordinators at the LGBT Foundation Zane Robinson and Louie Stafford were quick to recognise the value of speech and language therapy. The team provided participants with training, excellent workshop facilities and application process support for the voice and communication sessions.

Gender dysphoria

Trans people do not consider themselves to be suffering any kind of mental illness

and often reject the medical model. This will be familiar to lesbian, gay and bisexual people, whose behaviour was once considered a mental illness, until it was removed from the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* in 1973. However, it is widely recognised that gender dysphoria—when a person's physical presentation does not match their gender—causes great distress. The voice is often closely aligned with the sense of self, and so a voice that does not match one's gender can greatly contribute to the negative feelings associated with gender dysphoria. With this in mind, the team wanted to develop and deliver a group model rather than the traditional one-to-one model. We saw this as having the following key benefits:

- Trans individuals could support each other to change and monitor their communication.
- The workshops could also provide social support, allowing trans people to meet each other in a relaxed environment.
- There would be no need to 'pick a gender' and conform to traditional gender roles in workshops. Some trans individuals





do not identify with any gender, while others wish to change the gender they project at different times. Some individuals may not wish to change their sex through surgery or other medical treatments but do wish to project their preferred gender. This is reflected in the Trans and Gender-Diverse Voice & Communication Therapy Competency Framework (RCSLT, 2019).

It is important to consider that while many trans individuals may benefit from speech and language therapy, they do not have communication impairment. However, we were aware that trans individuals found access to speech and language therapy so difficult that they often turned to the internet and unqualified individuals for advice. This meant that people might follow potentially harmful practices, which could result in vocal abuse. It was therefore our first aim to promote vocal hygiene and highlight safe voice change.

Workshops

I developed an introductory voice and communication workshop series consisting of four 90-minute workshops. This proved highly popular and led to a second intensive voice and communication workshop, where trans clients received individual

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Louie Stafford and Sean Pert were awarded the Sternberg Award for Clinical Innovation at the 2017 RCSLT Awards.

assessment and intervention. We involved undergraduate student SLTs from the University of Manchester as volunteers, who were provided with:

- trans awareness training by the LGBT Foundation trans team—this included information on trans people and how to successfully engage with clients by using client-centred language and avoiding misgendering or making errors in personal pronoun usage; and
- voice and communication training and workshops from me—this ensured the students understood the advice given and the activities that were to be provided, and crucially, were able to demonstrate them to the clients.

The activities provided were practised as a group. This combination of mindfulness, vocal coaching and speech and language therapy voice therapy techniques was clinically supervised by Matthew Mills, consultant SLT (voice and communication) at the GIC in London, who also provided vital and enthusiastic clinical supervision and advice (see Mills and Stoneham, 2017).

The groups attracted between 12 and 35 attendees for the introductory course and we offered 12 clients, who previously completed the introductory course, places on the intensive course.

I was delighted to work with an enthusiastic and motivated client group, in a safe space where peer support is the

norm. Students have been welcomed by the clients, and I am constantly impressed by the honesty of the trans clients in their conversations with students. The trans community values speech and language therapy highly and many clients hope that this experience will help students to become confident working with trans people. We are fortunate to have worked with trans women, trans men and non-binary clients. In February this year, we welcomed our 100th client and have been joined by student volunteers from the University of Sheffield and Manchester Metropolitan University, and several local SLTs specialising in voice, who wished to gain more experience with this client group.

Feedback from both the clients and the student volunteers was positive, with both groups developing skills and confidence through the experience.

Clients valued vocal hygiene advice and practical exercises on the various aspects of voice and communication, including breath support, pitch change, articulation and language use. Their comments showed that the group model was acceptable and that they enjoyed working with the student volunteers.

Half of the students had not met a trans person previously. All reported that they felt more skilled working with trans people as a result of the groups and all would recommend volunteering to their peers.

Positive outcomes

We continue to run three groups a year in partnership with the LGBT Foundation, including a ‘taster session’ at the Sparkle weekend (Sparkle is the national charity for trans people). A former group member has started a monthly peer support group that we provide with supervision, advice and support, as requested by the group. We also deliver a weekend intensive course for trans people who find it difficult to access groups during the working week.

Our films of trans and non-binary people demonstrating voice and communication techniques feature on the LGBT Foundation website. We hope that these will serve as reminders for former group attendees, and also reach trans people who are considering voice and communication change but who may feel isolated from services.

By collaborating, the LGBT Foundation and the University of Manchester have been able to provide positive mutual learning opportunities for trans people and students alike.

The team was delighted when our work was recognised at the 2017 RCSLT Awards, where we received the Sternberg Award for Clinical Innovation. In addition, the University of Manchester awarded us the Making a Difference Award for Social Responsibility: Outstanding Contribution to Equality and Diversity (2017) and Staff Volunteer of the Year (2018). ■

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