

ASL 3050 - Signature Final Paper - Overview of Deaf Community and Deaf Culture

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This class has allowed me to expand my knowledge of the Deaf culture and Deaf community. This paper will contain information that I have learned throughout the whole semester. As an ASL major, and using sign language almost every day, I had previous knowledge of the Deaf community and I have a few friends that are Deaf as well. Having these experiences outside of the classroom allowed me to connect the topics we learned in class to things I have seen in the real world.

Throughout the class we read the book “Introduction to American Deaf Culture” by Thomas K. Holcomb. Most of the lectures we had in class were very similar to what was covered in the book. It covered topics such as culture and deaf hood, American sign language, Deaf literature and art, Deaf culture as well as diversity and issues that deaf people face. These topics were important throughout the semester to be able to write our primers and also do presentations. The lectures along with the book allowed for two different learning opportunities to make sure the information was clear.

Early on we discussed labels and how they can be used both correctly and incorrectly. There is a difference between the words “deaf” and “Deaf”. This is known as little ‘d’ deaf and big ‘D’ Deaf. According to the book the “lowercase ‘d’ ” refers to the “physiological condition of not hearing regardless of whether or not they choose to identify with the Deaf community”. On the other hand, “Deaf” with a capital “D”, is used to “characterize deaf individuals who use sign language as their primary mode of communication, identify with Deaf Culture, and participate in the Deaf Community.” (Holcomb, 2013, p 38). This difference is important to be aware of early on to make sure the terms are used correctly. Most Deaf people do not consider themselves disabled, but rather they just have a minor inconvenience. One thing I learned about

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myself is, in the Deaf community, I would not be considered “hearing”, but instead, I would be labeled as “hearing-but”. The definition of hearing in this context is referring to someone who doesn’t know/doesn’t use American sign language and because of this they are neither aware nor emerged in the Deaf community. “Hearing- but”, according to the book, means that it is “designated for hearing people who have exhibited an extraordinarily positive attitude toward Deaf people and a deep respect for Deaf culture in general.” (Holcomb, 2013, p. 48). I have taken many ASL classes and am now fluent in the language, I participate in Deaf events, and I also have a few Deaf friends. All of this has allowed me to learn about and be very respectful of their culture and, since I know their language, I am able to communicate with people who are Deaf. Cultural Identity and labels are important for everyone and no one likes to be mislabeled. Cultural Identity plays a major role in self-esteem and self-awareness. This is important as to whether you are Deaf or hearing but it also gives people who are deaf the choice between being audiologically deaf, or Deaf and being involved in the culture and community.

Being involved in the Deaf community and culture is very important for a lot of Deaf people. I have talked about the Deaf culture and community together but what do they really mean? The definition of culture is the arts, customs, and habits that characterize a particular society or group. Community is a group that practices the culture and also shares a common understanding and often shares the same language, manners, traditions, and laws. There are four different factors involved in the ASL community: linguistic, social, audiological, and political. Linguistics means that one knows ASL, social means that you interact with others in the community, audiological is based on one’s level of hearing ability and political means that one understands the laws that affect the community as well as advocating for the community. The political factor in this is very important. Advocating for ASL, human rights, and accessibility and

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also fighting oppression is something that members of the Deaf community do every day. The oppression that Deaf people often face is known as audism. Audism is an attitude and thinking that results in negative stigmas and stereotypes against people who cannot hear. In other words, hearing people believe that they are superior to people who are Deaf strictly because of the ability to hear. Many people try to “fix” deaf people and are very audio-centric based. This brings up the discussion of equality versus equity. Equality would mean everyone is treated the same way despite hidden factors. The issue with this is that some people may need a little extra help to be even with their surrounding peers. Relating this to deafness, if everyone is given a cochlear implant to be able to hear, only the people who are deaf or hard of hearing would benefit. This would be useless for individuals that can already hear. In this situation, equity would be the correct choice because equity means that everyone gets what they need in order to be successful. Politically speaking, Deaf people are not pushing to be equal to their hearing peers, but they are just wanting to be awarded the same opportunities regardless of the factors that may hinder them.

The use of American Sign Language is not the only difference in Deaf Culture and American culture. Many people are not aware of these differences and it is important to be conscious of these. Social interactions in Deaf culture widely vary from those of American culture. Deaf people rely on others within their community to be able to share information. Comparing this to American culture, Deaf people will often share everything and be very open while most Americans are more closed off. Another noticeable difference between American and Deaf culture is the concept of space. When two hearing people meet, they may or may not physically greet each other, and if so, it is often only with a handshake. Deaf people, on the other hand, will often immediately greet others with a hug regardless of their hearing ability.

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Americans tend to have conversations with a lot of space in between them, while deaf people will stand very close. Deaf culture is more collectivist whereas Americans are more individualistic. Collectivism means that the people are expected to identify and work well in and for groups that protect them in exchange for their protection. They also tend to accept that different groups may have different values. The individualistic American culture values individual uniqueness and self-determination. They also believe that there are universal values that should be shared by all. Continuing to compare these cultures, American culture is monochronic and likes to do only one thing at a time and they value a certain orderliness and sense of time. The Deaf culture is very polychronic. They like to do multiple things at once. Additionally, the Deaf culture is also very past oriented. They are rooted in their history and place great value on past traditions and ways of doing things. They are very slow to change things because they appreciate their history, and therefore, Deaf storytelling is the way they pass that important history on to other generations. Advancements of technology have helped the Deaf Culture but as previously mentioned, they are very past-oriented, so they continue to do things today the same as in the past. We have to take into account that we are outsiders to the Deaf community. It is important to recognize and remember that we will never understand what it is like to be deaf, but we can be respectful of their community and traditions and also fight for their equality, equity, and accessibility. Keeping this in mind, we need to understand that Deaf people feel like an outsider in American culture as well as a minority group.

Identity formation is important for everyone. Humans like to know where they fit in and this goes along with the idea of self-actualization. We often learn these ideas from our parents, peers, and role models and this is the same for individuals who are Deaf. There are many different kinds of Deaf identities that Deaf people can identify with. Balanced bicultural means

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that a Deaf person identifies with both the hearing and Deaf communities. Deaf dominant bicultural means that a Deaf person can identify with both groups but would prefer the Deaf community. Similar to this, deaf people, who prefer to be around hearing individuals and mainly use spoken language, would be identified as hearing dominant bicultural. Being culturally separate means that the individual is neither truly a part of the hearing world nor Deaf culture. If an individual is part of both cultures, they are culturally marginal. Culturally isolated is an individual who chooses not to be a part of the Deaf community, and if they are not aware nor given the option to choose, then they are culturally captive. There are different stages of identity awareness including conformity, cultural awareness, resistance/immersion, and introspection. Cochlear implants can cause controversy within Deaf culture and identity formation. If a deaf child is given a cochlear implant at a young age, the Deaf culture believes that the child did not have a choice in choosing whether they want to be a part of the hearing community or Deaf community.

Continuing on the topic of Deaf culture, it is not the culture that is new, but rather, the study of the culture is new. Fred Schreiber who was the Executive Director of the NAD, was the first to consider it as a culture. Different terms within this topic are Deaf Tend, Deaf Way, and Deaf World. Enculturation means “the gradual acquisition of the characteristics and norms of a culture or group by a person, another culture, etc.” This allows for earlier opportunities for Deaf children. This could happen at different times including at birth, initial school placement, transferring to a Deaf school, or graduating from high school and going to a Deaf University. There are many cultural values within. Their language is visually oriented, and they are proud of their language. They also value residential/Deaf schools as well as Deaf events and clubs. They

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have many core values as well, such as full access to communication, information sharing, healthy identities and self-determination.

We spent a lot of time in class talking about Deaf literature (also known as Deaf Lit) and Deaf art, including a project that we had to present in front of the class. Deaf lit is a way to share and express their culture and its experiences. Deaf lit is not confined to only presentations in ASL. It can also be work written in English, by a Deaf person. For my partner project we chose to talk about affirmative and resistive art in ASL and chose two artists who frequently do this type of artwork. Affirmative art depicts a positive attitude on Deafness and ASL while resistance art depicts a negative attitude and focuses on the suppression and oppression of the Deaf. This oppression often includes oralism, audism, and cochlear implants. It was interesting to see the contrast between these two types of art. The noticeable difference was the colors used.

Affirmative was very bright and colorful while resistive used darker colors. One of the artworks that stood out to me was “A Family Dog” by Susan Dupor. She focused on the struggles of being Deaf in the hearing world. At a first glance the picture was a little creepy. The painting shows the feelings of isolated Deaf children living with non-signing hearing families. The faces of the other family members were blurred which compares the experience of lipreading to the experience of listening to a tv program that is disrupted by static. I believe that the reason this painting was given the name “Family Dog” is because the deaf child, who wears hearing aids, is similar to a family pet that is patted on the head while being told “good girl, good girl”. In the artwork, we can also see that the girl is separated from the rest of the family by a gate, similar to how a dog would be. This is also a resemblance of the communication barrier that the Deaf world experiences. Until recently, ASL literature, including stories and poetry, were only used in deaf clubs, deaf schools, and deaf homes. Now, they are easily accessible for anyone, no matter

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hearing or deaf. This is somewhat due to the fact that more ASL classes are being offered as well as advances in technology. While this may seem like a good thing that ASL is being more widely used, this leads to more misuse of the language and people trying to sign without fully knowing the language or what they are doing.

We talked briefly in class about ASL as a language and the linguistics involved. There have been many misconceptions over the years about whether or not ASL is a real language. People thought that the hand symbols were just English words represented through the hands. After much research, linguists began to acknowledge the fact that ASL had its own grammatical features and was able to represent thoughts, concepts, and ideas just as spoken languages are able to. William Stokoe was the first person who systematically studied sign language and he had a major impact on the Deaf community and American Sign Language as a whole. He coined the term American Sign Language and Ameslan. Spoken English and American Sign Language are similar in their grammar, but they are different in spoken versus visual. There are different phonemes in ASL, similar to spoken English. In ASL they are handshape, palm orientation, location, movement, and non manual signals/markers. When all of these aspects are put together, they create individual signs that later form ideas and sentences. Non-manual markers are things such as body movement, facial expressions and mouth morphemes. These aspects are very important and add emphasis to certain words and ideas that are being signed. ASL also has noun-verb pairs. For example, using the words 'teach' and 'teacher'. The word teach is a verb, but when you add the agent and the word becomes teacher, it is now a noun. Space in signing can also change the meaning of words as well as allow you to get your point across while only using one sign by using space and movement to create the concept. There are different types of sentences in ASL. Questions include yes/no responses, 'wh' questions (who, what, when,

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where), and rhetorical questions. Negations, commands, and conditionals are other types of sentences in ASL.

Working together in groups is an important skill to have and the group project allowed me to practice this. The prompt for the group project assignment was issues that the Deaf community faces. My group chose to research and talk about employment and education issues within the Deaf community. Employment experiences for Deaf people are often very different from those of hearing individuals. There are many issues during the application process as well as in the workplace. There is a difference in part-time and full-time work, earnings and wages, as well as opportunities for advancing within the company. The issues that Deaf people may face could start as early as the application and interview process. Employers often skip the step of asking if the Deaf person would like to have an interpreter. It is the employer's responsibility to provide an interpreter, not the Deaf person. This issue causes a communication barrier from the start and may cause information to be lost or misunderstood. The employers may regard deafness as a disability as well. Many deaf individuals will experience isolation during their lives. This can often happen in both the workplace and in educational settings. Co-workers often expect Deaf people to be able to fully process spoken information and knowledge. When this does not happen as quickly as expected, the Deaf individual may be seen as incapable or lacking intelligence.

Isolation in the educational setting often occurs when a Deaf student is mainstreamed into a majority hearing classroom. They are the only, or one of very few Deaf students so it is hard for them to find people similar to them. There is controversy between students being mainstreamed or attending a Deaf school. Mainstreaming refers to an educational placement of a Deaf student alongside his or her hearing peers. In mainstream education, Deaf students often

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find themselves in a setting that doesn't provide adequate access to the communication in the classroom. There is often the issue of these students not having qualified interpreters who are able to correctly translate the information from the teacher to the student and vice versa. On the other side of this, mainstream schools are very easily accessible, and the curriculum is more universal which could better prepare the students for the majority hearing world. In contrast, Deaf schools are specifically for Deaf students. These environments allow for the student to be surrounded by others who are similar to them in terms of their ability to hear. The communication is solely through American Sign Language which allows the students to have full accessibility to the information around them without the need to rely on an interpreter. The children at Deaf schools are further immersed in the Deaf culture and community. By being surrounded by other deaf students and faculty, they are less likely to feel lonely. When trying to decide whether it is best to send your child to a public mainstream school or enroll them in a Deaf school, there is no right or wrong choice. There are many variables that play into this decision. Where you live can determine if it is possible to go to a Deaf school but if there is not one geographically near the family, then mainstreaming will be the best choice. Finances can weigh into the decision by determining if you can afford a private school, a mainstream public school, or a private Deaf school. A major factor is the level of hearing ability of the student and this could influence the decision in school choices. For example, a person who is mildly deaf or hard-of-hearing and uses oral language may prefer to go to a mainstream school, whereas a profoundly deaf person who is fluent in sign language is more likely to be more comfortable at a Deaf school.

There are many other issues that are prevalent for the deaf community. One of these issues is health care and accessibility. It was very interesting to watch this group present their

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project because they were able to combine these two issues into one overall problem that Deaf individuals experience. When dealing with your personal health, it is vital that all the information is clearly understood. When hospitals and doctors' appointments do not have qualified interpreters available to interpret the information, it is hard on both sides. Oftentimes, the hospitals will ask if there are friends or family that can come to interpret, but this causes a conflict of interest.

Accessibility is a very important aspect in the Deaf community and culture. Diversity and inclusion are important in everyone's everyday lives, whether hearing or Deaf. Diversity is important in the Deaf community, but it includes more than just the generic racial, religious, ethnic, and economic background categories. This can include individuals with different levels of hearing, different associations with the use of sign language, different educations, differences in acceptance and support and also different aspects of identification with other Deaf individuals. People in the Deaf community are often able to bond over their shared communication method of sign language.

Reflection

Throughout the course of this class, we have covered a lot of information. Coming into this class with past knowledge of ASL and the Deaf community, I was worried that this would-be repetitive information. Instead, this class was more centered on the backgrounds of Deaf cultures rather than the specifics of actual signs and how the language works. I feel like I was able to expand my knowledge of the Deaf culture in a way that will benefit me in the future. As I have mentioned before, I am an ASL major, so I am constantly learning new signs and learning new things about the community. This class will help me be more understanding and respectful of the culture of the Deaf community. In the future, after graduation, I want to work with deaf people in

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some way. I am possibly leaning towards being an interpreter. I feel like this class has given me a better understanding of the history and culture which in turn, will help me interpret in such a way that Deaf individuals will be able to understand. Without this knowledge, I would not be able to make strong connections with people in the Deaf community and this would have limited my interpreting capabilities and success. I now have a new appreciation of their language because of this newly learned information. I think this class will be very beneficial for me in the future because it is more about the background of Deaf people and ASL rather than solely focusing on conversational skills.

Personally, I am a very visual person and learner, so I am most interested in the visual art and the actors. The visual art that these Deaf artists create allows me to create my own opinions of what message I think they are trying to convey. I enjoy watching the actors when they are signing because I feel like I am now fluent enough in American Sign Language to be able to follow along without always needing the closed captioning. I feel like the art for this community is another form of communication. I enjoyed all of the presentations during the class and being able to learn about new people and ideas. I feel like the chapters in the book also helped me to gain a deeper understanding of the importance of this art.

Being an ASL major, I am very familiar with sign language, and I use it almost every day, both inside and outside of the classroom. Many deaf people are considered to be bilingual in both ASL and English. I am considered bilingual as well because even though my first language is spoken English, I am now fluent in American Sign Language. I have taken many classes to improve my receptive and expressive skills with signing, and I am now fluent. Having this prior knowledge of the language before coming to this class allows me to connect the information with what I already know. Along with this class, I am taking an ASL linguistics class and an English

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linguistics class. Taking both of these classes simultaneously is allowing me to fully understand the concepts behind how ASL and the signs are presented. We have talked about William Stokoe in a previous class, but I am also reading a book about his life in my ASL linguistics class. This book is called “Seeing Language in Sign” by Jane Maher. It has been very interesting for me to see the lasting effects that his work has had on the Deaf community and everyone around him. For me, I think understanding the Deaf culture and community is very important. I have multiple Deaf friends that I have met through school and other situations. I recently met a deaf couple that works in the school system in Washington, D.C. They have been a great resource for me. I met them when I got my puppy because they were also getting a puppy from the same litter. It was a very cool interaction to be able to help them, and the breeder communicate to make sure nothing was left out and to make sure they had all the information they needed. I am teaching my puppy sign language commands, so I stay in contact with the woman when I have questions, and we also enjoy looking at both of our puppies' progress. The woman was so happy that I knew ASL and that I was able to communicate with her so well. Being able to communicate with Deaf people outside of a school setting allows me to have more fluid and interesting conversations and also learn new signs that are not always taught in lessons.

I have had personal experiences with cochlear implants and the use of American Sign Language. When I was in high school, I took multiple ASL classes. During these classes we had two deaf students. One of them was born Deaf and he attended a Deaf school for a while until his family moved to our town. Since he was born Deaf, he was taught ASL at a young age. His family learned ASL to be able to communicate with him. He never learned speech and a cochlear implant probably would not have helped him much. With the other student, she became deaf later in her childhood, after she had learned and processed speech. In her case a cochlear

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implant was beneficial to her. Since she had already learned speech, learning to process the sound through a cochlear was easier for her. She later learned sign language, and this is now her main form of communication, but she is still able to communicate with her hearing friends through speech. When I first learned about their two different stories, I was very confused as to why their situations were so different. When I asked the first student why he didn't want a cochlear, he said there wasn't really a point because he was able to communicate just fine. We had a good friendship during high school, so he was vulnerable with me and told me that his family didn't have the extra money to afford the cochlear implant, but he didn't think it was necessary because he had a way of communicating with his friends and family. Both of these students enjoyed that the other hearing students in the class were learning sign language. It made their communication easier and they were also able to have better friendships without always having to rely on their interpreters.

Since I want to work with Deaf people in the future (possibly interpreting), it is important that I understand these issues and find out how I can help. With interpreting, it is important that I am qualified and capable of being able to relay the correct information to both the hearing and Deaf person. This could help with language rights and accessibility to bridge the communication gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds. I don't feel like we have talked very much about inclusion and diversity, but this is all around an important topic, not only in the Deaf community but the hearing world as well. I have been in situations where I have been left out of conversations but could still hear what they were talking about. This situation made me very frustrated, but I feel like it would be more frustrating to be left out and not be able to understand at all because you are Deaf and the hearing people are leaving you out of their spoken conversation. I believe that the Deaf community and culture are very diverse. They all share a

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common trait of using sign language, but within the group, there are people of different hearing abilities, races, gender, and many other things. I feel like these issues are important to be aware of in order to fully support their diversity and their inclusion.

Identity formation was an important topic that we talked about. Not only is it important for members of the Deaf community but it is important for everyone to find who they are and where they fit in. I like to be independent and do things for myself a lot of the time. This makes me feel like I can accomplish anything without needing anyone else's help. I have had a personal experience with the topic of deaf students and independence. One day, in my high school ASL class, we were working on individual assignments. The deaf student was working by himself and seemed like he was stuck on a question. The instructions encouraged us to ask a classmate if we were confused. When he turned to me and we began having a conversation and trying to work through the problem, the interpreter began to try and translate what he was saying to me. He got very frustrated with the interpreter because he wanted to be able to have a normal conversation in sign with me, (a hearing student) because he knew I would be able to carry on the conversation and also help with his question. Although we knew the interpreter was just doing her job, it not only made him feel like he was incapable of having a conversation, but it also made me feel less confident in my skills.

Communication is a part of everyone's daily lives. Whether this be spoken or visual, it is important that we are able to share information. I believe that deaf people should have a choice and an equal opportunity to choose what they would like to learn as their form of communication. I do, however, believe that the time when a person becomes deaf should play a major role. If a mother gives birth to a deaf child, I believe that she should begin teaching that child signs as a way for them to communicate. If a child or person becomes deaf at a later time in

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life, after they have already learned to speak, I think it would be beneficial for that person to then learn sign language, but they can also continue to use vocal language as well. In my high school ASL classes, we had two different deaf students: one who was born deaf, and one who became deaf in later elementary school. I feel like by having conversations with both of these classmates, I am better able to understand the difference and the importance between signing and oralism. The student who was born deaf never learned to speak and ASL was his main form of communication. Since he never learned to speak, he does not understand lipreading very well. On the other hand, the other student who became deaf later on, obtained the ability to speak and is still able to vocalize well. She and her parents made the decision to begin teaching her ASL. While this is her main form of communication now, she still understands lip reading and can communicate pretty well with hearing people.

Deaf studies in the United States has been a very interesting class throughout the semester. I was able to learn about many different topics that I was not familiar with, but I was also able to expand my knowledge on previous topics that I had learned in other ASL classes. This was one of my first ASL classes that was not strictly about expressive and receptive signing skills, so I was not sure what to think going into this class. In the end, I was able to leave with a lot of new information that I will be able to use in the future with my career. Continuing on the path I am on right now, I would enjoy working with Deaf children in the future. Knowing this information now about their culture and community will allow me to help them with their visual communication while also being respectful of their language.

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