

A Case “for” and “of” Critical Pedagogy: Meeting the Challenge of Liberatory Education at Gallaudet University

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This paper examines the linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical challenges that are part of teaching and interacting at Gallaudet University (GU), the only university in the world for D/deaf and hard of hearing students. Through examination of various definitions of critical pedagogy by Freire (1970); Giroux (1998; 1994); Higgins (1996); McKerrow (1989); and hooks (1996), and discussion of the ways in which critical pedagogy is and is not part of the administration, daily activities, and instruction in the classrooms at GU, it will be suggested that communicating and teaching in this unique cultural and linguistic environment is truly a case “for” and “of” critical pedagogy.

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A Different World

In a recent communication class at Gallaudet University¹ (GU), sixteen students sat in a circle discussing the demise of Deaf Clubs² in the United States. Of the sixteen students, nine represented the second, third, or even fourth generation of their Deaf families. As they discussed the problem in ASL (American Sign Language³), they shared stories of all the activities they and their families had participated in over the years and remarked on the importance of these events in shaping their identities as D/deaf⁴ people. They wondered what would happen now that technology had replaced the need for the face-to-face encounters provided by the Deaf Clubs, and whether or not these changes were for the better. The professor, a hearing person, stood back and watched with appreciation for their ability to express their experiences, their knowledge of the history and issues within the Deaf Community⁵, and the fluency and beauty of the expression of these thoughts through the language of ASL.

In a second example, a Deaf professor discussed (using fluent ASL) with students the need for advocacy within the Deaf Community. He described his dedication and how much of his own time he and many others had given working toward the passage of national laws that helped provide services for D/deaf people. He encouraged this group of young university students to become involved, get out there, and make a difference. He reminded them of the importance of “giving back” to their University. Throughout the talk, the students gave the speaker their complete attention and asked many questions.

A third classroom situation at GU unfolded quite differently. In this situation, a hearing professor from another department was invited to speak in a communication class because of her expertise in managing political campaigns and encouraging communities to come out and vote. As an American with Hispanic heritage, the professor knew how much minority groups could benefit from grassroots and targeted issue campaigning. Because the professor was a new signer and was not yet skilled enough to sign her presentation, she and the students had to use an interpreter to relay information and questions to each other. In terms of information and strength of presentation, the visiting professor’s talk was excellent. However, the students responded with only mild enthusiasm and very few questions. They were polite, but not as involved as in the first two classes described.

In the first and second examples of classroom experiences at GU, the students had the impetus to be actively involved in the discussions, both of which focused directly on their lives and took place through the use of ASL. The polite but uninterested response of the students in the third example was more than likely due to the lack of direct, free flowing communication with the professor. Although nearly all D/deaf students at GU are experienced at using interpreters and the interpreters on campus are highly skilled and fluent, they still felt disconnected from the speaker because of the dissimilarity of experience and language. As the only university in the world specifically designed to

serve D/deaf and hard of hearing students, GU is one place where direct communication through sign language is desired and expected. However, as shown by the classroom examples, the success of interactions in the classrooms and all around campus is varied according to and dependent upon the language skills and cultural knowledge of the people involved.

These classroom stories are only brief examples of the dynamics of language and culture that occur between D/deaf and hearing people, but they effectively demonstrate the importance of language and culture to D/deaf people on campus, and in general, of D/deaf people in the world. D/deaf people hold a unique and dialectical position at GU and in society; as people proud of their language and heritage that operate fluently and competently in the experience of life, while at the same time being subjects of unequal or limiting experiences because of their inability to hear and use spoken English. For D/deaf people at GU, everyday brings with it the joy of interacting with ease and equality within their own community, along with the challenge of interacting across cultures with hearing people.

GU has always been considered a primary site for the generation and continuation of social, cultural, linguistic, and political traditions and values not only at the University, but within the Deaf Community; what happens at Gallaudet has repercussions throughout the Deaf Community. As the “cultural gatekeeper” (McLaren, 1995) in the Deaf Community and with the ongoing opportunities and ever-present necessity for members of the GU community to challenge the D/deaf—hearing dialectic, GU is simultaneously a place that is a result of and a call for liberatory educational practices. This paper proposes that the interactions and experiences among constituents at GU and, between them and the outside world, represent a case “for,” as well as a case “of” critical pedagogy.

While a variety of definitions for the concept of critical pedagogy in educational settings have been advanced, the majority promote the goals of equaling experience between dominant and non-dominant groups and creating liberation and empowerment of both students and teachers within educational settings. Toward supporting the case of and for critical pedagogy at GU, several of the definitions of critical pedagogy will be briefly summarized (Friere, 1970; Giroux, 1998, 1992; Higgins, 1996; hooks, 1996; and McKerrow, 1989) and applied to various experiences on campus. In addition, the Deaf President Now (DPN) protest of 1988, because of its inherent importance to the development of Gallaudet University, itself, and its effects on the social and political interaction between GU and the hearing community will be described, not only to examine the existence and need of critical pedagogy, but also to set the social, political, and cultural scene of the GU campus. Discussion of the more recent Unity for Gallaudet protest of 2006 will also be included, but more briefly due to the recent nature of the events and fact that the effects are still emerging.

Critical Pedagogy in Brief

Paulo Freire (1998), the preeminent scholar of critical pedagogy, says that classroom experiences, through the facilitation of teachers, should become situations in

which students are encouraged to engage as active agents in their own education and learn to develop a critical consciousness that allows them to assess the validity, fairness, and authority within their educational and living situations. Teachers, administrators, and others in authority positions must also engage as active agents, but in this case, as agents of deep self-reflection that allows recognition of the power and authority of their positions and the subsequent effect on students.

He proposes that classrooms be places in which both students and teachers establish “epistemological curiosity” (1998, p. 30). As students learn to become “dexterous” and competent questioners of the material presented by the teacher, the teacher also will learn from the questioning of the students, and begin to ask questions, not only of them, but also of the system in which s/he has achieved mastery. Questioning, thus, becomes a foundation of education and classrooms become venues for creating “possibilities for the production or construction of knowledge (1998, p.30).” In such an environment, teaching and learning move beyond a “banking system” of education that results in students’ rote memorization of static input provided by a teacher. Teachers and students learn that the position of “teacher” does not make the person holding the title an ultimate holder or transmitter of reality or truth. Instead, classroom social positions are leveled to where teachers become beings, just like the students, and they, together, are “relational to the world and to others.” Together, they construct their own learning environment and the world into which they will act (1998, p.89). In this way, they develop a higher level of critical awareness, a new “conscientization” of the conditions that exist in the present, as well as those from the past that led to current situations of inequality. As teachers and students engage in education as a practice of freedom, they are able to envision and enact change to create a world that offers greater equality to all groups, no matter what race, religion, socioeconomic level, or ethnicity (1970).

Another prominent scholar of critical pedagogy, Henry Giroux (1998), applies Freire’s suggestion of creating a classroom atmosphere of questioning to encouraging students’ involvement and service in civic affairs. He suggests that education should assist students in developing their abilities as critically thinking citizens who can take their place in the conduct of democratic life. This requires that education occur in an environment that is connected to everyday life and community and that encourage classroom discussions that are conducted within the language and knowledge forms of the students. Such openness and attention to the community allows participants to develop a critical consciousness that enables them to recognize and evaluate the structures of power that may have lead to inequality and oppression in the educational and social settings in which they are involved. This “pedagogy of lived experience and struggle,” affirms and validates the experiences of the students, and even though risky for them, empowers them with access to the power of knowing, articulating, and even the possibility to move beyond and transform present situations.

Both Freire and Giroux say that another major tenet of their definitions of critical pedagogy that is equally important to that of empowering students is the development and enactment of a critically reflexive role for the teachers. In order to create an

environment of equality and openness, teachers must engage in deep self-reflection about their position and the affects of their authority in the classroom. This proposes a most difficult task for teachers, to be sure, particularly those who have grown up and been educated in the dominant society, since the standard societal structures that constitute teaching and learning are quite rigidly rooted within and reproducing of that dominant culture. Challenging the structures means teachers must reject long-standing cultural expectations and mores of their own and the system, and, additionally, they must relinquish much of the power afforded to them by their titles. Teachers must deal with their own concepts of freedom and authority if they are to create autonomy for students in the classroom (Freire, 1998).

Because the educational experiences of most teachers were far more strict and formulaic than the ones they are planning to use, teaching within a philosophy of engaged critical pedagogy becomes a learning environment for both teachers and students. Crabtree (2004, Crabtree & Sapp, p. 110), an American college professor who taught for her university in a study abroad program in Brazil, comments that the self-reflection of a professor must take “the form of questioning one’s motives, purpose, ideology, and pedagogy as informed by theory and habit” (2004, p.108/110). As Freire (1998, p.30) claims, “teaching that does not emerge from the experience of learning cannot be learned by anyone.”

Classes become “student-centered” when teachers are able to engage in a form of self-reflection that allows them to acknowledge unsuccessful educational ideas, as well as the oppressive forms inherent in their own educational practices, claims Higgins (1996), another proponent of critical pedagogy. His theory expands the focus of critical pedagogy beyond its use in the classroom. In order to be truly liberatory, teachers must go even deeper than self-reflection, to an examination of the oppression that may be contained within the notion of critical pedagogy, itself. The practices of “giving voice” to a particular group or the use of dialogue in the classroom may not be liberating if they are not undertaken in an environment of equality. Higgins follows the early ideas of Freire (1970), in stating that dialogue cannot happen “without humility” or in a situation where teachers or leaders place themselves above others and/or see themselves as owners of the truth. In addition, Higgins cautions, educational practices must be appropriate to and inclusive of the sociopolitical and socio-cultural conditions within which the education occurs.

For hooks (1996), critical pedagogy means creating conditions within the classroom that promote “wellness” of the student and the teacher; wellness as evidenced by both the passion and excitement of learning, as well as the inclusion of true multiculturalism. Only when everyone’s experiences are valued and included can education be considered liberatory and multicultural.

In her book, Teaching to Transgress (1996), hooks relates the story of her own early educational experience in a segregated school for African American students. During that period of her life, she loved going to school because her teachers took an active interest in her and all the students at the school. The children were seen by the

teachers as “the future” for the black neighborhoods. With her power, identity, ethnicity, and worth thus affirmed and supported, hooks felt school was exciting and full of possibilities for transformation in the future.

Sadly, that period of hooks’ life ended when her town instituted enforced busing. Among other problems, hooks felt the experience at the white high school lacked the spark of her first school and that her teachers were not invested in the students as the future of their community. Their rote and mechanical teaching methods and the strong atmosphere of racism deadened the enthusiasm for education that she had developed in her early years. Since those experiences, hooks, inspired by Freire and others, has developed an educational philosophy that describes “education as the practice of freedom,” one that empowers children and teachers. Her philosophy also encourages the interrogation of the white supremacist patriarchal, capitalist ideologies that she feels have dominated educational ideologies for too long.

A broader definition of the concept of critical pedagogy that extends it from classroom practices to the larger community comes from McKerrow (1989). His concept, called “critical rhetoric,” postulates that citizens need to learn to examine and recognize the inequality and oppression targeted at them through the discourse of more powerful groups in society. More powerful groups dominate others by elevating their own cultural, ethical, and linguistic practices as the “master narratives” within the community environment. Less powerful groups are expected to not only accept the master narratives, but endeavor to take them on as their own. The goal of critical rhetoric is not only to expose the forces and tactics used by dominant groups to marginalize others, but also to develop the ability in less powerful groups to create a counter-discourse that may lead to the transformation of master narratives into narratives that are multicultural and multi-vocal.

Finally, to tie together the definitions of critical pedagogy outlined above, Giroux (1994) suggests that critical pedagogy be seen as an important aspect of cultural studies. For critical pedagogy to be effective there must be an understanding of the real life experiences in society and a focus on understanding power dynamics between groups. With these understanding, schools must be considered sites of cultural production and reproduction, and representative of the conditions of power and knowledge of the communities in which they occur. When studied or enacted as part of cultural life, critical pedagogy can be understood as common sets of problems or conditions that exist within the social, political, historical contexts of society. The sets are composed of paired dialectical conditions that include: “the relationship between knowledge and power, language and experience, ethics and authority, student agency and transformative politics, and teacher location and student formations (1994, p.285).” In a situation steeped in critical pedagogy, the sets of conditions must be continually recognized and addressed by participants in order to create and advance a level of critical consciousness that can encourage social change and equality between groups.

The six pairs of conditions suggested by Giroux, along with the ideas of critical pedagogy detailed above, will be used to further explore the existence of and the need for

critical pedagogy at GU. Before specific classroom and campus experiences can be addressed, it is important to briefly examine a most important event in the history of Gallaudet University, the Deaf President Now (DPN) protest of 1988. This protest, although slow to start, ignited the fire of critical consciousness that burns strongly to this day on campus.

Before the DPN Protest

Though D/deaf people had been fighting for decades for better educational, political, and economic opportunities, and had built strong organizations and leaders within their own community, they hadn't had, until DPN, the opportunity to fully articulate and institute their own agenda at Gallaudet University or in any other mainstream venues. For centuries, D/deaf education, services for D/deaf people in the community, and opportunities in the world of work were dictated by hearing people. D/deaf children were long oppressed by an educational system, which emphasized learning and speaking English over the use of sign language, nearly to the exclusion of critical thinking, other academics, and functional life skills⁶. As a result, D/deaf children were not able to learn and work up to their potential, and, as adults, became as Higgins (1980) describes them, "outsiders in a hearing world," who were stigmatized by their use of sign language and paternalized by hearing people because of their difficulties in communicating and with spoken and written English.

At the same time, even with the oppression and paternalism of the hearing community, D/deaf people continued to build their own community in which, their language, ASL, was accepted and cherished. Despite the attempts of hearing people to dominate the lives of D/deaf people and eliminate the use of sign language in education and society, ASL survived and flourished largely due to the efforts of D/deaf people themselves⁷. When D/deaf people were together, they could participate fully in life without linguistic or cultural barriers.

In the 1980's, advocacy efforts in the national Deaf Community focused on increasing services and communication access through the establishment of telephone relay services, the installation of TDDs (telecommunication devices for the deaf) in public service agencies and emergency centers, increased professional interpreting services, captioned films and television, and more appropriate, individualized educational programs for D/deaf children (Gannon, 1981). Through these activities, D/deaf people worked diligently to change their position in the world. Yet, despite the achievements of D/deaf people within their own community, it was still rare to find a D/deaf person in charge in the work place or in educational settings, even in schools for the D/deaf or at GU.

Added to these difficulties was the tenor of the legislation of the 1970's providing services for deaf people such as the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the 1975 P.L. 94-142, the Education for all Handicapped Children Act.⁸ Though these services were certainly needed and desired, they created another level of oppression for D/deaf people in that the laws grouped D/deaf people with and labeled them as "disabled." Many D/deaf people considered themselves to be a cultural linguistic minority that was

not “handicapped” or “disabled.” Others, for lack of any other narrative from which to operate, believed the disability narrative imposed on them from the hearing world. Baker-Shenk (1986) used Freire’s term “existential duality” to describe the ambivalence D/deaf people felt in conducting their lives during this time. In some ways, they strove to be like their oppressors, hearing people, knowing that replication of the oppressor’s ways may bring them success. In other ways, they longed to break free from that oppression and exercise their own self-determination.

Critical Pedagogy & Critical Rhetoric in Action at Gallaudet University

D/deaf students who went to GU in the 1980’s brought this tumultuous history with them, and they soon learned that the power structures that were in place in the public educational system and in society in general, were also in place at GU, even though it was a center of Deaf culture and community. The University had been run by a hearing president since its opening in 1864, and that most of the positions of authority on campus were held by hearing people. In the classroom, many of the professors were hearing and often unskilled in ASL. Being a student at Gallaudet meant having the best of opportunities to achieve, but at the same time, because of audism⁹ on and off campus, meant continuing to struggle with the dialectics between D/deaf and hearing people; between ASL and English; and between states of freedom and oppression. The DPN protest would help improve these conditions.

In 1987, when then President Jerry Lee announced that he was leaving GU and a search committee was set up to find his successor, leaders in the Deaf Community seized the opportunity to make the case for that this was the time for the selection of a Deaf president. However, it was an uphill battle for these leaders because even though the general consciousness of the Gallaudet and D/deaf communities was somewhat raised by the activism of the 1980’s, the possibility of selecting another hearing president for Gallaudet was still quite acceptable to the majority of people on campus. However, the major organizations of the Deaf Community, including the National Association of the Deaf, the Deaf Counseling, Advocacy, and Referral Agency (DCARA) of California, and the various state organizations of the Deaf, along with the foremost leaders of the Deaf Community pushed ahead. They sponsored letter writing campaigns encouraging Deaf people to apply for the presidency and wrote editorials in their respective newsletters saying that it was, indeed, time for Gallaudet to be administered by a Deaf person. They initiated and held numerous community meetings across the country and made sure that selecting a D/deaf president at GU was the first topic of discussion.

Most influential to this effort at GU was a small group of alumni who called themselves, “The Ducks”¹⁰ who worked tirelessly on and off the campus for months to make the dream of a D/deaf president a reality. But their effects were minimal for quite a while on campus as the general consensus among the students, staff, and faculty, even as the selection time neared, continued to be that it didn’t matter if the new president was D/deaf or hearing, as long as he was the most qualified person and one who could to promote Gallaudet University in the world.

It was not until the campus community met for a rally, arranged by the Ducks, shortly before the selection of the new president that the Gallaudet community's thinking was changed. For an entire afternoon, the rally, led by four student leaders¹¹ who had been selected and trained by the Ducks, moved the participants from one historic spot on campus to another, while numerous D/deaf people presented speeches and told personal stories of their oppression as D/deaf people, while all along making the case for the selection of a D/deaf president for the University and empowering the audience with the strength of their own stories and the possibilities for the future. Bringing together so many like-minded people, all focused on one goal created for them tremendous solidarity and motivation to achieve their goals. As Roslyn Rosen, a Deaf woman and then dean at Gallaudet said of the rally, "Today we have gone from "why" a Deaf president to "why NOT" a Deaf president (Christian & Barnartt, 1995, p. 52)."

After the rally, the campus community began to look to the newly chosen student leaders for direction and inspiration. They had good reason to feel confident that a D/deaf person would be selected as president; two of the three finalists were Deaf men, well known and respected in the Deaf Community. The third finalist, Elizabeth Zinser, was a hearing woman, who, although she was well qualified to be a university president, had no knowledge of sign language or the Deaf Community. A week later, the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees stunned the campus community with their announcement that Elizabeth Zinser had been selected as the 7th president of Gallaudet University. The depth of the disappointment of the campus community became the trigger for the transformation of the Deaf Community. In that moment of the announcement of Zinser as the new president, the community realized that they could not longer be controlled by the authority of hearing people who knew nothing of their lives, their language, or their community.

Buoyed by the prior work and support of the leaders of the Deaf Community, and the inspiration of the rally, four student leaders led the community in a week-long campus lock down a series of marches, meetings, speeches, national media appearances, and demonstrations. During the week of protest, the cry from the community shifted from slogan created at the rally a month earlier of "why not a Deaf president," to a deeper and more demanding, "Deaf President NOW!"

It was a dramatic, heady time for the Deaf Community. By the end of the week of protest, Zinser had resigned, and I. King Jordan, one of the two Deaf finalists, had been selected as the 8th president, and the first *Deaf* president of Gallaudet University. In addition to now having a Deaf president, three other student demands had been met, including a change in the structure of the Board of Trustees to 51% D/deaf members, the resignation of Jane Spillman, the Chair of the Board of Trustees at the time, and the promise of no reprisals for students, faculty, or staff who had participated in the protest.¹²

The events leading to and of the protest itself can be described as strategic and spontaneous occurrences of critical pedagogy. The learning occurred not in the classroom, but within and in connection with the activities of their everyday lives. The D/deaf leaders, by bringing up the possibility of a D/deaf president and questioning the

reasons why there hadn't yet been a D/deaf president at GU, slowly encouraged change in the thinking and helped the students develop their own questions about the way things were. Applying (1994) Giroux's sets of conditions, the students and the Deaf Community transformed their knowledge of their own community into the power to create change. This occurred throughout the selection process, but became most effective at the rally. When members spoke of the oppression they had experienced and the ways it had limited their lives, the GU community began to operate with a higher sense of consciousness than they had previously, and felt empowered by their own experiences. When the BOT chose a hearing person, they had the perfect vehicle through which they could collectively express their oppression and articulate the changes that needed to occur. At the rally and throughout the protest, their visual language of ASL and their cultural experiences were promoted among themselves, shown to the world, and integrated into their goals. Each day of the protest, they were able to challenge the ethics and authority of and stand up to a paternalistic, audist board of trustees. The leaders from the D/deaf Community, and later the students, faculty, and staff of GU, exemplified the embodiment of agency that transformed forever the politics between the Deaf and hearing worlds. McKerrow (1989) would claim that with the DPN effort, the Gallaudet Community exposed the tactics of their hearing oppressors and forced them to change the master narrative they had developed about the Deaf Community.

Although the Ducks and other leaders were primarily responsible for beginning and organizing the protest, the success of the DPN protest has always been credited to the students, particularly the four student leaders (Christiansen & Barnartt, 1995). DPN was truly an instance where education became what hooks (1996) and Freire (1998) would call a "practice of freedom." The students, faculty, and staff created a powerful counter-narrative that was best expressed by their new, Deaf president, I. King Jordan, who signed the now famous quote, "Deaf people can do anything hearing people can do except hear."

Promoting a Deaf Way of Being

Because of the DPN protest, many positive changes occurred at GU. Christiansen and Barnartt (1995) claim that the protest led to increases in student enrollment and funding, along with changes in the numbers of deaf people hired on campus and changes in campus policies about the use of ASL on campus and in the classroom. They say also, (p. 203) that the protest sparked a high degree of symbolic visibility not only within the Deaf Community, in the world outside the University as well. The DPN protest continues to this day to be a model of positive change for the Deaf Community and an extremely successful instance of a minority group redefining their narrative and triumphing over the master narrative imposed on them from a hegemonic majority group.

According to Padden and Humphries (2005), the task for Deaf people in the latter part of the 20th century was to display their history and culture in public space to people of the country. They did so in the decades since the protest through theater, media, publishing, and research that explained and portrayed Deaf Culture. In addition, the research of Stokoe (1960, 1980) and other linguists had proven that ASL is a full and

complete language. As a result of these advances, D/deaf people came to see themselves in a different way than ever before. As Padden and Humphries describe it:

Being Deaf was not a consequence of not hearing. Being Deaf was an existential experience, complete in itself and not a consequence of broken bodies but the outcome of biological destiny. As many Deaf people came to say “I don’t want to be hearing,” they shocked even themselves and their hearing public, but the experiment in self-description resonated strongly among Deaf people (2005, pp. 156-157).

A strong Deaf Culture has always given D/deaf people both inclusion and separation in the larger society. After the success of DPN, they began define their own unique goals and ways of being (2005, Padden & Humphries, pp. 160-162).

Establishing and maintaining a Deaf way of being became a major task on the GU campus and in the years after DPN, administrators, staff, faculty, and students worked hard to make the University one that is welcoming to all D/deaf people, and also one that could take its place among the universities of the world, preparing students to become engaged, capable citizens. Throughout the history of the Deaf Community and GU, as well as in current times, the most important factors in achieving any goals that set are those of language use and language accessibility. To be an open, accessible campus where students and others can learn and achieve with equality, all activities must be conducted through ASL and visual communication.

ASL, as the primary mode of communication in the Deaf Community has an intimate and everlasting relationship with the Deaf Community. According to Padden and Humphries (1988, p. 5), sign language, with “its unique pattern of transmission lies at the heart of the culture” and its continued use has become synonymous with the survival of Deaf Culture. Among other reasons, ASL has survived its history and the numerous attempts made by hearing people involved in deaf education to eliminate it, because of the absolute suitability and accommodation of its structure for use among people who take in and express information in a visual mode (1980, Cokely and Baker). ASL, as expressed by a Deaf student at Gallaudet, “is life itself.”

The 1995 University Communication Statement emphasizes the importance of ASL and its importance to the community. Over the years, it has evolved and now incorporates this most basic of all requirements for successful, meaningful interaction in a D/deaf environment. It states that:

The University is committed to creating a visual communication environment which best supports scholarship and the basic tenets of humanistic education. Three principles will be our guide as we work together to ensure that clear and visual communication is the norm in every University unit and department.
 Principle 1: At Gallaudet, effective sign communication supports education.
 Principle 2: Sign communication at Gallaudet will be inclusive, respectful, and flexible.
 Principle 3: Direct sign communication is central to the Gallaudet vision.
<http://gallaudet.edu/x281.xml>, 10/28/07)

Achievement of the goal of a comprehensive visual environment both challenges and empowers the campus. Though the preferred language of the Deaf Community is ASL, the University Communication Statement without specifically stating it, supports a variety of sign language and visual communication forms. It is common to see a variety of other forms of visual language, including English based sign systems such as SEE, simultaneous communication (or simcom, characterized by spoken English with manual signs added to each word), oral methods (lip-reading and speaking), and even spoken English.¹³ The variety of languages and language forms has been an area of contention on campus between the administration, students, staff, and faculty. Besides classroom issues, the lack of signing skills among the Department of Public Safety officer is of particular concern. Language issues on campus reinforce the ongoing dialectical struggles between D/deaf and hearing people, signed and spoken languages, and between ASL and English forms of signing. At GU, language issues manifest themselves most sharply in the classroom.

Language, Culture, and Liberatory Education in the Classroom

Language is the means by which students gain knowledge and power, and the process through which they express their experiences, develop agency, and learn to question the social and cultural systems around them. The classroom examples described at the beginning of the paper emphasize the important connections between the accessibility of language and the opportunity for students to be fully involved in their education. The fluid, empowering discussions described in the first two examples provided opportunities for D/deaf students to question the master narrative placed upon them by the hearing community. In both classes, the discussion followed a direction created by the students and occurred in fluent ASL, thereby creating liberatory learning moments. Because the conversations included talk of the past and future existence of Deaf Clubs and increased advocacy in the Deaf Community, they represented, as McKerrow (1993) suggests, the creation of a counter-narrative with which to exert a strong Deaf identity into the socio-cultural environment at Gallaudet and subsequently, when the students move out into their chosen professions, within the community at large.

In addition, in the first example, the professor's acceptance of a role as observer gave the students the freedom to speak from their own experience and to engage in self-determination. The professor gave up her position of authority as teacher and as a representative of the dominant hearing world. In this class, the students were the authorities. The students' stories of their experiences growing up in the Deaf Community and their ideas about what to do in the future served as lessons for them all.

In the second classroom example the professor used stories of his own experiences to encourage the students to engage in advocacy in the Deaf Community. In doing so, he became an admired role model for them. His position as a Deaf person who had received a Ph.D. and who had achieved success both in the Deaf Community and in the hearing world empowered the students. Because his early educational experiences were similar to the students' own, they could envision themselves someday achieving in the same way. By describing his lived experience and struggles, and by opening his experiences to their questions, he showed them how to examine their lives and the

structures of society. Just like teachers in bell hooks' first school (1996), this professor saw the D/deaf students as the future of the community, and felt it was his duty to educate them as a practice of freedom.

The successes of these two classroom examples represent best case scenarios of critical pedagogy within the Gallaudet environment. As the students deeply engaged in the discussions, they were becoming active change agents, contributing to the redefinition of their lives and establishing their own futures as leaders in the Deaf Community. However, such smooth and fluid experiences are not always the case in GU classrooms.

Although all faculty, hearing and D/deaf, are expected to be able to communicate fluently in ASL and/or visual language with the students in their classrooms, many hearing professors and even some of the D/deaf professors have not achieved the desired fluency in ASL before they begin to teach. When D/deaf students encounter professors who cannot communicate competently and freely with them, as in the third example provided at the beginning of the paper, their enthusiasm for learning is dampened and their education is compromised through the lack of information exchange and lack of connection. Without signing skills, the expertise of the professor, however impressive, cannot be delivered with the integrity desired by the professor, nor can it make a full impact on the students. When the visiting professor in the third example gave her presentation about the political process through the use of an interpreter rather than signing for herself, the students were not engaged by the presentation because of the lack of direct delivery. As a result, her presentation became more of a monologue rather than an exchange of ideas. The lack of questioning on both the parts of the professor and the students didn't allow for the expression of personal thoughts and limited the range of creative possibilities for discussion. Because of the lack of connection, it was difficult for the students to see themselves working in the political process in the same way the professor had. In addition, their relationship to the professor aroused suspicion as they wondered about the motives of someone without signing skills choosing to teach at Gallaudet. Lucas (2004, p. 1) explains that language serves not only to express one's thoughts and transmit information, but also defines "one's identity, group loyalty, relationship to interlocutors, and understanding the speech event."

Another difficulty that arises in GU classrooms as a result of the students having a greater fluency in the language than the professor is that of a shift in power relations. While critical pedagogy proposes that classroom interaction be student-centered, it does so with the intention of having the professor serve as a moderator or guide for the overall curriculum of the course and the scheduling of the class. If there is a lack of understanding between professor and students, the professor cannot serve in that role and classroom structure and dynamics become problematic. Attention in the class shifts from what should be theoretical concerns and critical questioning to concerns about communication and understanding. In order to be liberatory, the communication itself cannot be the focus. As Lucas (2004, p. 2) claims, "the highly symbolic value of sign language derives in part from the fact that signing allows people to communicate unhindered, with a focus not on the medium but on the message."

In another turn of usual professor/student locations, Gallaudet students are given the opportunity to evaluate the communication skills of their professors through course evaluations. Negative comments about signing skills noted in course evaluations often find their way into administrative evaluations of the professors or are brought to the attention of the professor by Department Chairs. Any professor so identified must take steps to improve his/her skills and show proof of that improvement in subsequent evaluations. On the website “Rate My Professor” sponsored by the Student Body Government (www.gallaudet.edu/SBG), professors who can communicate effectively are routinely given the highest ratings. The ratings of those who cannot are much lower and the comments express extreme frustration and dissatisfaction.

The administration at Gallaudet takes student satisfaction in the area of classroom communication as an extremely serious matter, believing that it is essential to the educational process. Since DPN, the administration has taken steps to improve the communication in classrooms by establishing an extensive sign language instruction program to assist faculty and staff in improving their ASL skills. In addition, an evaluation system of employees’ ASL skills is connected to requirements for advancement, reappointment, and tenure. However, even with this system in place, loopholes and exceptions exist, and some faculty and staff continue in their positions even without the required language skills. The instructional program and evaluation system are subjected to continuous scrutiny and are currently undergoing revision to make it more fair and manageable by all on campus.

For new and less experienced signers, learning to fully participate in this community with ASL requires much substantial and sustained study and interaction to achieve native-like fluency. Learning how to *be* in ASL requires much humility as the learner’s primary language and culture are moved to the background and the language and culture of D/deaf people is brought into the foreground. Agar (1994, p. 20) describes the process as developing a new awareness:

“Culture is no longer just what some group has; it’s what *happens to you* when you encounter differences, become aware of something in yourself, and work to figure out why the differences appeared. Culture is an awareness, a consciousness, one that reveals the hidden self and opens paths to other ways of being. Culture happens when you learn to *use* a second language.”

Hearing professors, as ASL students, must be self-reflexive their own motives for becoming involved in this community and examine how their positions as members of the dominant group in society will affect this endeavor. With that, they can begin to develop a critical consciousness with which to examine and question the hegemony of their primary culture toward the Deaf Community within the areas of language, culture, education, employment, and interaction within society.

The matter of communication access and the right to fluent ASL comprise both the central challenge and ultimate privilege of the GU classroom. As the classroom examples and analyses showed, a philosophy of critical pedagogy does exist at GU, but it is also equally and continually challenged. Providing education as a practice of freedom

on campus, and thus within and for the Deaf Community, is an ongoing, essential goal of Gallaudet University. In 2006, these goals were put to a supreme test as the campus was once again plunged into a dramatic protest.

The Ongoing Challenge of Education as the Practice of Freedom

In 2005, when I. King Jordan, the first D/deaf president of Gallaudet, announced that he would step down from the presidency after 18 years of service, history repeated itself as the Gallaudet community once again disagreed with the BOT's selection for the next president. After less than a year, the search committee had completed their process and in May of 2006, the Chair of the Gallaudet University Board of Trustees announced the choice of Jane K. Fernandes as the ninth president of the University. The announcement, just like the announcement of Zinser in 1988, sparked an immediate and dramatic protest. The "Unity for Gallaudet" protest was a direct statement against the selection of Fernandes, and by association, the Jordan administration.

This time, the major issue was not the selection of a D/deaf president, but instead, controversy over the fairness of the search process and perceived problems in the administration of the University. In particular, students claimed that the presidential selection process was flawed. They charged that the selection committee discriminated against people of color because they did not advance into the final round a qualified African American candidate who had served for years as President of the GU Board of Trustees. They claimed, also, the process had unfairly promoted the candidate ultimately selected, Jane Fernandes, as Jordan's protégé and seeming heir apparent to the presidency. Fernandes was an unpopular figure on campus because of her impersonal style and what students and others saw as an unsuccessful six year run as Provost. The students felt that she was most decidedly *not* the right person to represent Gallaudet University on campus or in the Deaf Community, at large.

The protest split the campus into those "for" Fernandes and the administration, and those against her. Along with those issues, the protest exposed deeper problems that had been occurring on campus. The students questioned the administration's methods in the recruitment and retention of new students, as well as their statements about how the increasing number of hard of hearing students and those with cochlear implants coming into GU would lead to significant changes in the Deaf Community and impact the use of ASL and the education on campus. Although the students had difficulty describing their complaints as clear, concise objectives, they still moved ahead with their protest based on the strength of their intuition that their rights as D/deaf students were being compromised.

They, along with an ever increasing number of faculty, staff, and alumni stuck steadfastly to their convictions that there was widespread racism and audism on campus that initiated from the administration. This protest, unlike DPN, was not spearheaded by leaders in the Deaf Community, but by the volition and planning of the students, themselves. Much more volatile and divisive than DPN, this protest included the take over of a classroom building for a week, the closing down of the entire campus for three days, and the arrest (ordered by Jordan) of 135 of the protesters. The arrests came to

symbolize both the plight and conviction of the students. On the night they were arrested, they stood at the gates locked arm in arm, each holding their ground until they were pulled away by security personnel. When one student was taken away, another would take his/her place. The level of solidarity and commitment grew as each student was arrested, and later with each passing day and each attempt of the administration to stop the protest.

The interplay of the pairs of problem conditions suggested by Giroux, although unknown to the students, provided a foundation for their unrest. The students and other protestors wanted the power to be more involved in making decisions that affected them; they wanted more knowledge about policies and procedures. They wanted the University to make a solid and strong commitment to the language of ASL and for professors, staff, and campus police to have more highly advanced sign language skills. They didn't want an administration that would not listen to them and preferred to wield their authority by arresting their own instead of negotiating with them.

The students reached out to professors for help; many did, but many, especially those without tenure, were afraid to take a stance. Throughout this student led protest, the protesters exhibited active agency in their own educational process. They risked arrest and expulsion from the University to promote their desire for equal access to communication and more say in the decision making process concerning their education at the University. They had examined the power dynamics and found themselves under the thumb of what they considered to be an oppressive administration. And they acted. They ventured deep into administrative territory and asked to be involved in administrative matters that had never been the province of students. Undeterred by criticism from the administration and the outside world, the students and their supporters persevered until they achieved their goals. The protest succeeded when the Board of Trustees rescinded Fernandes' contract and a process was put in place to reopen the presidential search, install an interim president, and select a new provost.

The protesters of this generation, who by the end, included a significant number of faculty, staff, and alumni, whether right or wrong, had operated from a place of critical empowerment. Within the 18 years between the DPN and the Unity for Gallaudet protest, the community had become empowered to the point that they felt comfortable enough in their own skin and confident enough of their own power to challenge the administration of the University. The students had developed a critical consciousness that enabled them to recognize, evaluate, and attempt to change their situation. As Glenn (2002, p. 2) describes, they were able to perform "as citizen-critics" outside the classroom because at some time in their GU education, they were able to perform as "critically thinking and speaking subjects in the classroom."

This description of the recent protest barely scratches the surface of the issues and events that took place. It will take quite a bit of time for the legacy of this most recent protest to emerge, but for now, as in the past, the Gallaudet community recognizes and accepts the value of its own members challenging the relationships between knowledge

and power, language and experience, ethics and authority, teacher location and student formations and student agency and transformative politics.

In light of the accomplishments of the campus community, Gallaudet University can be seen as a dynamic environment that demonstrates the existence of and need for a critical pedagogy. The words of Agar, speak to the challenge of creating an intercultural, liberatory Gallaudet environment:

“The ‘natural’ or ‘right’ meanings, *the ones that tell you who you are and how the world works*, turn arbitrary, one of a number of possibilities. Your ‘natural’ language shines under the light of a new awareness; it blossoms into a fascinating complexity; you see possibilities you never imagined existed (p. 21).”

Protest, for a second time, brought with it empowerment and challenge. Perhaps, in the future, with continued focus on development of critical consciousness within the campus community, the dynamics of change can occur as a matter of course rather than from the tumult of protest. Members of the community will see and create in their communication and actions with each other possibilities they never imagined existed.

End Notes

1. Gallaudet University was established in 1864 by an act from the U.S. Congress and signed by Abraham Lincoln. It is the only university in the world dedicated solely to the education of D/deaf and hard of hearing students.
2. Deaf Clubs have been in existence since the existence of D/deaf people. Before the 1970's and laws requiring equal accommodations for people with disabilities, Deaf clubs served as meeting places for D/deaf people. The clubs sponsored activities, trips, and a place where people could sign.
3. American Sign Language (ASL) is a full language created by D/deaf people in the United States. ASL was originally created from a combination of natural sign language used by D/deaf people in the United States and French Sign Language brought to this country by Laurent Clerc, a teach of the Deaf from France who came to this country in 1817 to help Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet begin the first school for the D/deaf in this country.
4. The use of D/deaf is inclusive of many D/deaf people. The use of the capital “D” connotes a member of the Deaf Community, whereas the use of the small “d” refers to someone who cannot hear.
5. The Deaf Community is composed of a D/deaf people who support and socialize with D/deaf people. Cokely and Baker (1980) claim that there are four avenues of

- acceptance into the Deaf Community: being unable to hear or hard of hearing; socializing with D/deaf people; use of sign language and ASL; and working for political and social advancement within the Deaf Community. Members of the core Deaf Community meet all four requirements.
6. The first formal schools for the D/deaf began with the establishment of the American School for the Deaf in West Hartford, CT in 1817. The period 1817 to 1880 was known as the “golden age” of D/deaf education because many states had their own school for D/deaf students that promoted and used sign language. However, in 1880 at a conference for teachers of the deaf held in Milan, Italy, undid most of what was accomplished to that point and declared that the “oral” method of lip-reading and speaking was best for D/deaf children. From the time of the Conference of Milan until the 1970’s, schools and programs for D/deaf students emphasized the oral method and, in many instances, forbid the use of sign language.
 7. Despite the efforts of the supporters of the oral method, ASL survived within the Deaf Community. Deaf people always found each other and wherever they congregated, a natural sign language emerged.
 8. The Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, sections 503 and 504, provided for accommodations for disabled people attending programs supported by government funds. For D/deaf people, the meant the provision of sign language interpreters. Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act led to the development of many mainstream educational programs for D/deaf children. Instead of having to go away to a residential school for the D/deaf, D/deaf children were allowed to attend their local public schools and had the right to support services as outlined in their Individualized Educational Plans (IEP). For many D/deaf children mainstreaming and lonely because they were they were often the on D/deaf student at a school.
 9. Audism is a term coined by Tom Humphries, a noted Deaf researcher and author, “is the notion that one is superior based on one’s ability to hear or behave in the manner of one who hears” (Humphries, 1975, unpublished essay).
 10. The Ducks included Steve Hlibok, Mike O’Donnell, Jeff Rosen, Paul Singleton, James Tucker, and Fred Weiner
 11. The student leaders of DPN included Greg Hlibok, Tim Rarus, Bridgetta Bourne, and Jerry Covell.
 12. The DPN protesters felt that the BOT of GU was particularly audist and did not have the best interests of D/deaf students in mind when they chose Elizabeth Zinser as President. The Chair, Jane Spilman, was particularly disliked for her refusal to learn sign language and because she was quoted during the protest as

having said that D/deaf people were not ready to run the University—a charge she denied.

13. In the 1970's, in an attempt to make English more accessible to D/deaf children, many English based forms of sign language were invented. They include S.E.E. (Seeing Essential English) and other forms. Simcom is an abbreviation for simultaneous communication and means that a person speaks English while simultaneously adding a manual sign for each word spoken. Neither SEE nor simcom are considered languages in their own right, nor effective methods of communication with D/deaf students.

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