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A Snapshot of an Evolving Writing Center into a Bilingual Service

Fall 2008 / Training

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Working to integrate a new mission statement into writing center practice



Cindy E. Officer

Tutorial & Instructional Programs (TIP) of **Gallaudet University** is undergoing major transformation as this article is being written. This evolution includes a complex debate of what a “writing” center should be. What readers will see here is a snapshot of an evolving writing center program being redefined by the university's new mission.

History

Gallaudet University for 144 years has been an institution of higher education for Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and Gallaudet has also been described as a beacon, a witness, and an archivist of Deaf and Hard of Hearing heritage and culture. The Deaf experience, similar to those of other minority groups, has been defined by a long history of oppression and survival. For over a century, Gallaudet has been viewed by Deaf and Hard of Hearing people as a place where communication barriers suddenly “slip away” and access to higher education can be realized. Thousands of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people through the decades have earned their degrees from this university. Notably Gallaudet has always been a place where signing was accepted even against more than a century of adversity. For the last 120 years — a period in Deaf history referred to as Oralism — Deaf and Hard of Hearing children and their families have been subjugated to often brutal policies, practices and discourse aimed at preventing them from learning or using sign language to communicate — many bordering on apartheidistic and holocaustic — in the name of fixing or concealing “broken ears.” Only in the past 20 years has Oralism tapered off as knowledge and acceptance of various sign languages as true, natural languages

has risen (Ladd 8-9). American Sign Language (ASL) — the language of Deaf and Hard of Hearing Americans — was thought to be either a crude collection of gestures, or to be an “inferior” form of English. However, linguistic research beginning in the 1960s has shown that ASL is a true, complete and rich language in its own right, unrelated to English. By 2006, forty states had recognized American Sign Language (ASL) as a foreign language (Harrington). However, ASL users hold a linguistic minority status in a country that does not have sustained governmental recognition for this group (Ladd 7). Taking its proud tradition of supporting sign language farther, Gallaudet University in August of 2007 adopted a new mission statement touting bilingualism: “Gallaudet University, federally chartered in 1864, is a bilingual, diverse, multicultural institution of higher education that ensures the intellectual and professional advancement of deaf and hard of hearing individuals through American Sign Language and English. Gallaudet maintains a proud tradition of research and scholarly activity and prepares its graduates for career opportunities in a highly competitive, technological, and rapidly changing world” (Gallaudet). As a result of this new mission statement the university has been undergoing institutional and systematic changes while being constantly mindful of “language privilege” — a catchphrase derived from “white privilege” — that is used to signify systematic oppression of Deaf and Hard of Hearing people and their language ASL, by favoring English as a superior language of learning.

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A Writing AND Signing Center

As a result of the new university mission, Gallaudet students are now required to increase acquisition of both languages during their tenure at the university. Shortly after Gallaudet adopted its new mission statement, Tutorial & Instructional Programs changed its mission to: “providing bilingual instructional support programs to assist students in achieving their academic goals as well as providing training and support for peer tutors.” This means TIP, like other student programs, must now provide fair, even equitable, services and training in both English and ASL. The term “writing center” suddenly became construed as oppressive because it favors writing and ignores signing. Through a new bilingual lens, even the mere term “writing” specifically points to writing in English thereby disregarding a place for ASL. Suddenly TIP with its “writing center” was a program only half-operational. The other half needed to be created in support of academic ASL. Thus TIP has entered an era of incredible, mind-boggling challenges that continues as this article is being drafted.

Challenge One: Understanding the Bilingual Continuum

TIP's role is gradually becoming one of promoting fluency in English and ASL as distinct languages. When examining bilingualism, it is important to note that bilinguals in general are seldom fluent in both languages (Grosjean 23). A majority of bilinguals acquire various languages at some point in life and this is especially true of Deaf and Hard of Hearing students. Many come to Gallaudet exhibiting more fluency in either ASL or in English. Historically Gallaudet has been a place where the attitude was to tear down communication barriers for deaf and hard of hearing people and this was usually done by mixing English and ASL and, thus, most people found themselves along a situational continuum which induces different language modes (Grosjean 23). This is true for the tutoring experience.

In response to the new mission, Gallaudet faculty adopted a new curriculum with more courses requiring assignments to be done in English and in ASL whereas in the past nearly all graded coursework was done in written English.

Challenge Two: Redefining Roles

Last fall, "Writing Advisors" became "Language Advisors." The title "Language Advisor" identifies the person, usually a peer, who guides students in literacy and "signacy." Signacy refers to the ability to use a visual/manual medium of linguistic transmission in the form of watching, signing/attending whereas more common term "oracy" refers listening, speaking and spoken interaction (Nover and Everhart). Students come to TIP to get writing advice on written English assignments, and similarly they come to TIP to get signing advice on presentations using ASL. In nearly all sessions, the natural discourse between the Language Advisor and student continues to show both parties reverting to mixing English and ASL through signacy. In the past as in the present, most Language Advisors and students sign to each other when discussing written coursework but will not use either ASL or English monolingually. Such is a common scenario where bilinguals who share their two languages will normally mix languages to achieve an end result (Grosjean). For TIP the end result is assisting students in achieving their academic goals.

Challenge Three: Hiring Practices

In response to the new mission, Gallaudet faculty adopted a new curriculum with more courses requiring assignments to be done in English and in ASL whereas in the past nearly all graded coursework was done in written English. TIP has been faced with the question — How does one gauge another's fluency in American Sign Language? It appears easy to help another person with English. The professional staff of TIP has long been required to possess native-use of English, have credentials in English and be able to determine if Language Advisor candidates have strong English skills. For Language Advisors there are resplendent English resources to provide assistance and feedback when English becomes troublesome. Usually one needs to look no farther than five feet to find peers, books, or the internet for help. Nearly all Language Advisors are hired based on recommendations from English instructors, the quality of their writing sample, and their "sign communication" abilities. In other words, they need to be more fluent in English than in ASL. This can easily be construed as being oppressive to many Deaf and Hard of Hearing people whose fluency lies more in ASL.

Challenge Four: Evaluating Language Advisors in ASL Proficiency

Unfortunately resources in ASL acquisition are deplorably scarce, and much of the minimal resources available have been viewed as outdated, controversial, inadequate, and even invalid. There are no standard K-12 curriculums in ASL instruction to say nothing of college curriculum. Because quite a few renowned ASL experts are connected to the university, Gallaudet has chosen to take leadership in further researching and developing ASL curriculums and instruction. Incoming Gallaudet students are now evaluated on their ASL abilities along with their English abilities and placed in both English and ASL courses. In the meantime at the program level, TIP wrestles with how to provide optimal signing advice services to students. Following a suggestion from faculty members from Gallaudet's Department of ASL and Deaf Studies, Language Advisors were asked to take the ASL Proficiency Inventory (ASLPI).

Twenty-two Language Advisors voluntarily took the ASLPI to provide a sampling of ASL proficiency among a larger pool of Language Advisors. The ASLPI involves an interactive process between a trained interviewer and the individual being evaluated. This 30-minute process is video recorded and holistically scored by three trained raters. The raters assign a proficiency level by considering the examinee's performance in five areas: visual-gestural production, ASL grammar, sign vocabulary, fluency and comprehension. Within approximately two weeks, each Language Advisor received a raters' report with a rating for each of the five performance areas and an average rating. On a scale of 1 to 5, only seven Language Advisors received an average rating of 4 or better. Of these seven, five Language Advisors received a K-12 education from the rare school that intuitively encourages academic ASL in the classroom as opposed to a school with a non-existing or a non-descript sign communication policy, and one Language Advisor was homeschooled by his mother who is a native ASL user. However 21 Language Advisors, 19 of whom are university students, received a 4 or better on the ASLPI in the area of comprehension which refers to overall understanding of the questions, comments, and statements made during the interview. Also examined in the area of comprehension were the Language Advisor's spontaneity, responses to questions, and ability to provide visual feedback to the interviewer. Of utmost importance, these scores indicate that most Language Advisors exhibit near native comprehension of ASL and conversely indicates they may not be able to articulate why students are using ASL inappropriately. This is akin to an English-speaking person thinking, "I know intuitively that was bad English but I cannot explain why." Without more resources and training in ASL semantics, most Language Advisors are not as equipped to give signing advice as well as they can give writing advice.

This is a unique situation where a writing center has been dramatically impacted by a university changing its mission.

Challenge Five: Surrendering a Non-Directive Approach In Favor of Expertise

In addition to its Language Advice Program, TIP is experimenting with classroom-based tutoring (CBT) in two ASL courses this semester. One section of ASL 101 and one section of ASL 102 have each been assigned a tutor who attends class regularly, writes weekly progress reports to the instructor and conducts weekly group and individual tutoring sessions. Fifteen percent of each student's course grade is determined by how frequently she or he meets with the respective tutor. These tutors conduct signing conferences with pointers from the instructor to work on various components of ASL semantics that cannot be taught in the classroom due to time constraints. This collaboration was created to explore viable ways to bring ASL to tutoring while mutually benefitting the instructor. This approach may be perceived as complicit in which the tutor potentially becomes the "long hand of the instructor's law" even though this pilot is touted to be a safe place to practice ASL. Arguably these tutors may also feel conflicted in their role after initially being trained to guide students through the learning process without feeling compelled to meet instructor expectations, then being retrained to do what the instructor expects.

A Look to the Future

Due to the lack of widespread education and resources in ASL, university faculty have suggested more directive approach in promoting ASL and one

proposal includes making TIP in its entirety a fundamental unit of the university's future bilingual education center. While Harvey Kail and John Trimbur may have identified writing centers as "semiautonomous" institutional spaces located "outside the normal channels of teaching and learning" TIP's future may lie in being run by university faculty with a paid utilitarian staff to teach ASL and English to students in direct collaboration with classroom instruction. The upside of this design is that students will be put in direct contact with the few ASL experts available. This is a unique situation where a writing center has been dramatically impacted by a university changing its mission. With all of the challenges being faced and the recurring answer being, "I don't know," professional staff and faculty are forming working groups to address how a bilingual mission statement changes instruction, tutoring, and management. TIP will be prolific in these discussions but at the time of this draft, it is not known where the future of TIP lies. This is a snapshot of Gallaudet University's Tutorial & Instructional Programs, March of 2008.

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