

Reflections on Mnemosyne's Pool: First Thoughts on Deaf Pedagogy

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Introduction

In the world of language, Deaf is a word that functions, most often and most unthinkingly, as a sign of a pathological condition. Within the Deaf community, however, it denotes a culture, a strength, a deed; an expressive, creative language, and a complex experience of being part of, but apart from, what is usually designated as “normal.” Deaf is thus multifarious and contested.

The speaking experience has impacted the Deaf experience, leading to the rise over time of an often unspoken experience of the Deaf that is radically independent from, but still intertwined with, the hearing experience. In what follows, I will explore some age-old images of the pathology of the Deaf and how these intertwine with my own personal experience of living in the gap between a Deaf and hearing world, and what such explorations and interweaving might have to tell us about Deaf pedagogy.

ASL speaking and English speaking¹ carries memoirs of the sign language community. Memoirs are “memos” – pieces of unfinished and unpublished writing that I will be using as a memory aid in interpreting Deaf pedagogy in the future. The memoirs position themselves on the margins of the conversations of curriculum studies because the conversations are primarily based on vocal traditions. As a side conversation that surrounds the ongoing conversation, I seek to provoke, tangle and complicate the meditative nature of curriculum studies as a “Deaf gain²”, a positive perspective, rather than a “hearing loss”. This approach was inspired from the mythological story about Mnemosyne's gift to Hermes:

Zeus and Mnemosyne slept together for nine consecutive nights and thereby created the nine Muses. Mnemosyne also presided over a pool in Hades, counterpart to the river Lethe. Dead souls drank from Lethe so they would not remember their past lives when reincarnated. Initiates were encouraged to drink from the river Mnemosyne when they died, instead of Lethe³.

Mnemosyne provides Hermes with two unique gifts: a lyre and a “soul”. When the god Hermes plays to the song of the Muses on the lyre, its sound leads both poets and gods to Mnemosyne’s wellspring of remembrance. In her clear waters float the remains of past lives, the memories that Lethe has washed from the feet of the departed, turning dead men into mere shadows...

Under the protection of Mnemosyne, the poets and Gods may recollect the residues that have sunk into her bosom by drinking from her waters. When he returns from his visit to the spring – from his dream or vision – he can tell what he has drawn from this source. Philo says that by taking the place of a shadow the poet recollects the deeds that a dead man has forgotten. In this way, the world of the living constantly makes contact with the world of the dead.⁴”

The proper use of memory, which fosters learning, is expressed by the term recollection. There are memories that I recollect from stories, research findings presentations, poetry and other utterances about Deaf pedagogy.

These memories drawn from Mnemosyne’s pool are particular to my own experience, as you will see formed initially by a hearing world to soon be profoundly tainted by the Deaf experience: from a moment of birth in one world to rebirth in another.

I do not want to simply record what was said about Deaf people and how it impacts Deaf pedagogy and then hand over it to you; I want to share my reflections with you. Plato shared the importance of reflection in the story, “The Meno”. Meno was a student who can memorize various opinions and definitions. Yet, if he is capable of memorizing, he seems incapable of understanding what he memorizes. Meno is unable to learn because of the attitude he takes towards traditional authority. He accepts without question, and memorizes the prejudices of a tradition. This is a use of memory that blocks the possibility of learning⁵.



Mnemosyne, Goddess of Memory
Photography Credit: Thomas Dodd. Permission Received.

Understanding Deaf pedagogy is a recollection of systems of thought. Different ways of thinking are connected in determining which knowledge is remembered and how one uses that knowledge to perceive others and to live well. As part of the recollection, I examined some of the historical and contemporary experiences that impact the everyday dynamics within Deaf pedagogy. And, through reading the works and reflecting the systems of thought are connected to wondering, experiencing and listening to the plenitude of contested voices that shape Deaf pedagogy. It is a journey “of all thought to be sought, the first is wisdom.”⁶ The search for wisdom helps us to understand how to live well on Earth with others. And learning how to live well on Earth with other human beings and all other life is fundamental to teaching and learning – especially when as teachers and [Deaf] students, we recognize the need to undertake the task of trying to undo the philosophy that may exclude others⁷.

Old Systems of Thought, Old Memories

Some recorded words spoke well of the Deaf; others words provoked. The oscillatory experience is parallel to Hugh of Saint Victor, a librarian of canonical Christian literature who said reading of the past is an ontologically remedial technique⁸.

We see that the pool is muddied by a variety of experiences by outside forces to the Deaf experience; voices we cannot hear but who claim to speak for us. History also shows us that the Deaf individual's memories were initially dark and foreboding, painting a picture of the Deaf as profoundly different and less than human.

None of historical document about the Deaf made sense; the views about Deaf people were written by hearing people. They were transmitted through the mouths of the hearing. Consequently, Deaf pedagogy was limited to the prejudices of the hearing. Deaf people were left with a hearing centered knowledge of how the world may appear and be imagined by those who lack hearing:

Plato's assumed that those without speech showed no evidence of intelligence, and so, he concluded, “deaf people must not be capable of ideas or language”...further reinforce Plato's notion with Aristotle's conclusion that “those who could not speak were ‘unteachable’...these biases toward deaf people continued throughout the Dark and Middle Ages, where deafness was seen even as demonic possession⁹.

... the Dark Ages were especially dark for deaf people. Beliefs in mystical and magical cures for deafness were prevalent¹⁰. Deafness was often interpreted as a punishment from God for the parent's sins that were not confessed.

From this history, as the waters settle and the silt sinks to the bottom of the pool, something begins to emerge, notes from a very different lyre gathering others to the pool, from the hearing experience that will lead to the beginning of the creation of Deaf memories, of a particular song.

New Systems of Thought, New Memories

Learning ASL was considered first and foremost as a necessity born of a consequence of hearing loss and therefore not first and foremost as a language. Hearing people and even Deaf people viewed sign

language as subset of English. However, this changed when a hearing man, William Stokoe, a professor of Gallaudet, the world's only Deaf University made a breakthrough discovery.

Stokoe was a hearing man who employed a structuralist view of language. He documented sign language and noticed that it has grammatical features like any other language. ASL has the grammatical features of hand shape, location, movement and orientation that are permuted to construct words, phrases and meaning. For example, the bended number two hand shape with different location, movement and orientation can create two words: travelling and snake. However, the initial responses of the Deaf community were against his discovery but over time, Deaf people accepted that they had a language. It was a radical idea during the 1960s. It took a while for Deaf communities to take advantage of ASL as a foundation for the corpus of literature.

Stokoe opened the door for Deaf people to the intellectual culture of linguistics. There is an increasing number of Deaf linguists who focus on the cognitive and literacy benefits of ASL, especially using ASL in the acquisition of English. ASL-English bilingualism was Stokoe's gift similar to the lyre and the soul Hermes received from Mnemosyne. Deaf people can use ASL as a linguistic structure to interpret past memories and to create new memories as a language and cultural group. With current video recording technology; we are going through a revolution around the world becoming globalized Deaf citizens.

Going back to the metaphorical Mnemosyne's pool of recollection and Lethe's river of forgetfulness, I have a memory where I was struggling to interpret.

In the Summer of 2010, I attended the *International Congress on Education of the Deaf* in Vancouver, British Columbia, and listened to presentation on curriculum development. The researchers wanted to develop a curriculum based on ASL linguistics. The study looked at Deaf children of Deaf parents. They were selected as subjects because it is theorized that Deaf mother-deaf child interaction are similar to hearing mother-hearing child. However, they were examining the Deaf language acquisition norms. *Deaf norms?* This is a radical concept. It not only reconfirms that ASL is a language. It implies that Deaf language is not "abnormal" but rather has its own "norms," and that Deaf people are therefore not disabled.

Some of the attendees at this conference were purveyors of the aural-verbal therapy approach in language learning. They operate from the medical perspective that Deaf people are disabled. As part of the medical operative, Deaf learners are taught towards the English speaking hearing person ideal. The available resources are plenty: Ear, Nose and Throat Specialist, Speech Language Pathologist, Occupational Therapist, and Special Education teachers. Some of their comments about the Deaf norms were expected: "*Why do we want to establish Deaf norms if they are disabled?* Hearing norms only exists; nothing else."

Old and New Systems of Thought, Contested Memories

Juxtaposing the Deaf and hearing norms, the possibility of illiteracy arises – there is a lack of culture. Nobody is both Deaf and hearing at the same time. No Deaf person wants to forget and, thus in effect, eradicate ASL. The hearing person has recollected the past through vocalizing and wants to share this

gift with Deaf people. Deaf people resisted. Owen Wrigley, the author of “Politics of Deafness” remarked that Deafness is outlaw ontology and like the waters that the figures of Mnemosyne and Lethe draw on, the ebb and flow of this activity asks: what did we remember and forget about Deaf pedagogy? Also, like the waters, the gap between the Deaf and hearing worlds and the questions that arises are a constant interplay of the sight and sound phenomenon that continues the side conversations surrounding the conversations about curriculum theory.

Did Mnemosyne only gave Hermes one lyre – recollections through vocalizations? Is there another lyre – recollections through sign language?

This was *my* memory.

Hermes is known as a trickster; he probably has two lyres.

Memories of a time and space where both Deaf and hearing people coexist are found in literature. Exceptional villages such as Martha’s Vineyard in America and Al-Sayyid Bedouin in the Middle East where both Deaf and Hearing people speak sign language are examples. Martha’s Vineyard only exists in written literature while Al-Sayyid Bedouin is still living. Nobody is both Deaf and hearing at the same time in these villages however they both speak the same language, an accessible language to all.

The villages’ large Deaf population generated two common key characteristics: critical mass and reduced fear. There were a large number of Deaf people, enough to tip the society over to learning two languages, signed and vocalized languages, as norms. And because of the large number of Deaf people, people are less afraid to listen to opinions of the Deaf for the benefit of the larger community.

In places where there is a lesser Deaf to hearing people ratio or a lack of critical mass, accessibility comes at a cost. This added economics to the Deaf identity; there is a cost to citizenship. ASL-English Interpreter resources cost money. Aural-verbal therapists emphasize that the larger society speaks English, not ASL and that it should be kept in mind in efforts to speak like the hearing.

Both of the villages symbolized a vision of many Deaf people – a fully accessible society that is premised on the mutual cultivation of sign and vocal language without taxing one’s culture. Literatures and narratives of these villages take accounts of “just living my life like everybody else” while searching for wisdom of living well that is beyond Deafness or Hearingness. Through these literatures and narratives, curriculum studies are as a paradox. It is multi-vocal and seeks space for voices to be included, listened to, and interpreted however, the haunts of its vocalized nature promotes Deaf cultural ways of looking at the curriculum to break in as part of an ontologically remedial technique of being beyond sound or sight.

Logocentrism: Concentrating the Pool

Mnemosyne’s pool and Lethe’s river serves as metaphors for a reservoir of memories with a surrounding river that carries lost memories longing to be part of our presence. Deaf scholars often refer to the works of Jacques Derrida to understand the hermeneutical privileging of vocalizations over the eyes: logocentrism.

Some philosophers put language, vocalizing, thought and God together at the center with other ways of being human on the outside looking in. This centralization was put forth by Aristotle that people who don't speak (vocalize) are incapable of intellectuality. "The Greeks have but one word, logos, for both speech and reason; not that they thought there was no speech without reason, but no reasoning without speech¹¹." It led to speculations about the intellectual capacity of the Deaf and the value of the ASL linguistic structure for the pursuit of wisdom. Here are some examples of logocentric thinking that limits the interpretive possibility or resisting the use of a particular Hermes's lyre:

"Even in exceptional cases like deaf and dumb language, there is not a real, expressive language of gesture but a substitution of an articulated use of gesture that represents articulated vocalized language"

-Hans-Georg Gadamer

Often, seeing sign language for hearing people brings up memory of strangeness, excessiveness, and alienation - sign language has a strange and incomprehensible physical presentation, a scary silence. There was a court case in Australia to include Auslan, Australian sign language, as part of Deaf pedagogy. Supporters of Auslan spoke about how accessible and natural sign language is for Deaf children, yet, Auslan for some hearing people:

"[It is] quite confronting...quite foreign, very different...lots of exaggerated facial expressions...exaggerated simply in a physical sense, and maybe for good purpose...gesture, even gesticulation, bodily movement...no sound, and an unusual physical presentation"

-Defense Counsel about Auslan

With language and vocalizations together at the center, some societies view ASL language learning as an exception or as an alternative if language learning through aural and verbal means has failed. It also places the aural/oral modality as the cognitive locus for linguistic structure. However, Derrida (1997) argued logocentric thinking privileges a particular embodiment through language or playing one of the lyres over others.

The pool remains standing alone, never separate because it is of humanity; the waters are once again muddied as the Deaf experience is poured within its memories taking its place amongst the human experience in which we all share. Quiet voices no longer remain still, many lyres are now played by many signing hands, and many are lead to the pool.



Between Two Worlds
Photography Credit: Thomas Dodd. Permission Received.

Endnotes

¹ For the purpose of this paper, vocalizing relates to the delivery of thoughts, ideas or imaginations through the biological mechanism of the lips, tongue and throat. It is used to distinct the different ways of speaking among the Deaf and hearing.

Speaking is generally synonymous to vocalizing. However, since thoughts, ideas or imaginations are from the speaker's minds, speaking includes American Sign Language. For example, I speak in ASL and hearing people speak English. Some people can speak both in ASL and English. It is not generally accepted in some Deaf communities to say Deaf people sign ASL. American Sign Language has its own grammatical and syntactical structure that is unique which means it is part of our speaking ability. ASL is not composed of signs of what *could* be vocalized; it is part of speaking.

² Bauman, D., & Murray, J. (2009) Reframing: From Hearing Loss to Deaf Gain. *Deaf Studies Digital Journal*, 1. 1-10.

³ Gunther, Z (1971). *Persephone: Three Essays on Religion and Thought in Magna Graecia*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

⁴ Illich, I (1993). *In the Vineyard of the Text: A commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

⁵ Gallagher, S. (1992). *Hermeneutics and Education*. State University of New York Press: New York.

⁶ Illich, I (1993). *In the Vineyard of the Text: A commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

⁷ McNicol-Jardine, G (2005). *Foucault and Education*. Peter Lang: New York.

⁸ Illich, I (1993). *In the Vineyard of the Text: A commentary to Hugh's Didascalicon*. The University of Chicago Press: Chicago.

⁹ Avon, A. (2006). Watching Films, Learning Language, Experiencing Culture: An Account of Deaf Culture through History and Popular Films. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 39(2), 184-204.

¹⁰ Marschark, M & Spencer, P. (2003). *Oxford Handbook of Deaf Studies, Language and Education*. Oxford University Press. New York: New York.

¹¹ Hobbes, T (1651). LEVIATHAN.

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