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Professional Development and the Ongoing Quest for Equity:

REFLECTIONS OF A 15-YEAR VETERAN IN DEAF AND ASL EDUCATION

By Sara Stallard

In my 15 years of teaching, I've participated in many professional development sessions in both K-12 and community college settings. I know that professional development does not always seem relevant to the realities of the classroom; however, I realize that I've had important professional development experiences that had a lasting effect on my teaching—all related to equity for deaf and hard of hearing students as well as for students in my American Sign Language (ASL) classes. I want to share some of these experiences—vital lessons that impacted my understanding of diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism, and helped my classes become more welcoming and safer for students. I also want to share what I previously assumed, what I learned, and what I hope to learn more about as I continue teaching.

Advanced Placement Expectations

In just one weekend of specialized training for Advanced Placement (AP) teachers, I was disabused of the notion that AP courses are only for high-performing students. A better perspective may be that AP courses are ideal for students who want to get a head start on college-style learning and develop skills that they might not otherwise develop in high school. While AP courses create opportunities for students to earn waivers for college credits, some students will not earn exam scores that colleges accept. Nevertheless, all students may find the AP learning experience beneficial in that they learn what it might be like to take the subject in college.

I also had to unlearn the expectation that students had to prove themselves with good grades. Ultimately, it was up to me to advocate for underperforming students who had the motivation and curiosity to try my AP English Language and

Photos courtesy of Sara Stallard



Left: Students from the MSSD Academic Bowl team hang out with their coaches—Stallard, at left, and Dana Sipek, at right (Spring 2012).

Composition course. I still remember the student to whom I denied this opportunity, and I regret it immensely. He went on to thrive despite my contributing to yet one more barrier in his way. As a successful Black man working with university students in an East Coast university, he shows how wrong I was.

I began to reframe the AP experience as a “try college on for size before you get there” opportunity, during which students could develop their English composition skills using strategies that would ultimately help them in college,

even if they did not fully master those strategies while still in high school. I extended this new understanding to advocate for AP placement of several juniors who tested as upper elementary- to middle school-level readers during intake as freshmen or transfers but showed strengths in writing. I provided electronic versions of model texts so they could use built-in dictionaries or translation software to assist in their reading. I also emphasized the stages of the writing process to reduce risk-adverse responses, allowing students to let go

of the pressure to be perfect and instead focus on developing and refining their ideas. Other teachers provided encouragement and support in other classes, too. Sure enough, through a combination of our work, their own determination, and the support they got in their other classes, those students went on to thrive in the colleges of their choice despite the low reading scores they had at intake.

Trauma-Based Learning

I used to think I was an easygoing teacher because I only emphasized

Right: Students gather in a circle to discuss literary elements from the short story they were just reading (Fall 2012).

three rules in my classroom: 1) No cussing (specifically the F bomb); 2) Bring your own pencils; and 3) Put your backpacks on the floor. Everything else was already school policy or addressed as needed. I figured why add more rules? I didn't want hassles or power struggles, and I thought that this was reasonable. However, after a professional development session on trauma-based learning, I realized that I might be treating my students inequitably.

For some students, I learned, backpacks might contain their most precious items. They shouldn't have to risk others stepping on and damaging their belongings. Of course I still didn't want them to keep their backpacks on their desks because this obscured line of sight when holding discussions in ASL and because some students would try to use their backpacks as pillows. So, after that professional development session, I stopped insisting they put their bags on the floor, and I set up an empty bookcase in the corner for them to use instead.

As for pencils and other school supplies, I was surprised to learn how unfair I was in expecting all my students to have the same level of preparation. Students might come to school from homes in which supplies were not provided or maintained, or students might have specific learning disabilities affecting executive functions. Why should we inflict shame on those students for not having what they needed? Our priority should be in ensuring they feel comfortable and safe so they can focus on learning instead of scolding them and singling them out for



negative attention at the beginning of class. Even if this only applies to one student out of an entire class, that student should feel a sense of belonging, the same as all the other students.

Another trigger for trauma can be the choice of topic. We do not always know what kind of family or home environment students experience. For example, if students come from families experiencing homelessness or poverty, discussions about holiday traditions or feasts can be distressing, as can discussions about living spaces. For deaf and hard of hearing students who come from homes in which ASL isn't used regularly, discussions about what they did over the summer or winter break can be depressing because these students may

Right: Students pose in front of the display of the short story they collaborated on, a sequel to *The Monkey's Paw* (Fall 2012).



experience isolation, even when trying to have a good time on vacation with their families.

Discussions about family trees or social roles can also be problematic when deaf and hard of hearing students are left out of conversations about family matters at home. Some students do not know the full names of their own parents or other relatives or even how their relatives are related to them.

Instead of focusing on topics that involve their families or homes, I found I could choose topics that focus on students' own thoughts and feelings. I changed my focus: I asked students what their goals were, and I encouraged them to visualize themselves in the future. When discussing social structures, I gave options, such as allowing students to choose between their own actual family experiences or those they may have seen in the media. Teachers should not insist that students discuss their own personal experiences.

Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder

One year, after an influx of students with autism spectrum disorder, I was part of a special professional development session focused on working with students with this condition. We learned how the brain works when it observes other people and their actions. We also learned how the

revealed something different than what was intended. We were asked to draw maps of our different identities. The goal of the exercise was to note our different identities and discuss how they interacted with each other. At my table,

Below: Teachers from MSSD's English Department participate in a professional development activity during the summer of 2012.



brain identifies and understands the feelings of other people, and that this is an area of function with which people with autism struggle.

This made me think about how to make my lessons more equitable for those of my students on the autism spectrum. They did not readily relate to discussion about character development in literature, but I discovered that one student really loved animals and another loved video games so I was able to use those as loci for discussing characterization. During my poetry unit, another student showed a fascination with the logic of structural rules governing poetic forms and the “tricks” involved in using figurative language so I made sure to focus on this instead of emphasizing analysis of emotions.

Intersectionality Training

One summer about five or six years ago, a schoolwide professional development was held on intersectionality. This

the White people, including me, readily drew maps. The two people of color sat motionless. None of us White people noticed this until it was time for discussion. Then we felt a mixture of embarrassment and consternation as the two people of color explained.

They said they didn't feel comfortable revealing this information about themselves, that they didn't feel obliged to set themselves up for comparison.

One of them told us, “Look at how fast you all bent to the task, eager to identify yourselves ... you have no fear of being judged, you're confident” The other said, “Yes, you didn't even notice we were not doing our maps” The gist of what they told

us was that this was not a safe space for them. This discussion taught me not to assume that everyone is willing to reveal personal information about themselves, and, most important, that we, White people, should not expect people of color or other marginalized peoples to feel they have to explain themselves to us.

In the years that followed, I've been working on understanding how people may respond to racism, especially systemic racism, as well as the efforts to dismantle racism. I've read books—*White Fragility*, *Me and White Supremacy*, *Nice Racism*, and *The 1619 Project*—and sought out anti-racist training workshops. I now realize how naïve so many White people, including me, were. We should not expect people of color to undertake the emotional labor of helping White people understand what it is like to be a person of color in the United States.

Universal Design for Learning

The concept of Universal Design for Learning has been around for a good while now. Early in my teaching career, discussions about this centered around

Below: A wall in Stallard's classroom is covered with large index cards on which students wrote and color-coded essay prompts related to the diaries they were reading. Post-It notes indicate student selections for prompts to which they planned to respond (Spring 2013).





Above: Students pose in front of the National Archives on a field trip (Spring 2013).

planning lessons to be inclusive of students' learning styles and ensuring they had images and videos to reinforce printed texts and that they also had multiple ways to express themselves.

Over time, Universal Design for Learning expanded to include digital learning and technological accessibility (e.g., text readability, image descriptions, captions for videos, transcripts for audio). I focused on adapting texts and differentiating materials for my high school students. I also gave workshops on how to support literacy instruction for struggling readers. When I began teaching in community college, the COVID-19 pandemic was raging, and education was fully remote. I took courses focusing on Google tools through an online university and obtained certificates in online expertise at both colleges where I teach.

Thanks to this ongoing professional development, I feel confident that I can create meaningful learning experiences for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students in both ASL and English. I can create discussion threads, quizzes, and exams using ASL video; I can offer transcripts in ASL gloss; and I can ensure information is chunked and

scaffolded, that text is reflowable, resizable, and readily translated or read aloud using the built-in translation and text-to-speech features in the learning management system.

Relevance for Learners

I have also

focused on ensuring learning experiences are relevant to learners. The college where I teach and work is committed to equity as articulated in its mission, vision, and values statement; its diversity, equity, and inclusion statement; and as demonstrated in its various programs. For example, I recently completed the year-long Courageous Leaders Academy program for faculty and staff that focused on developing cultural humility; understanding foundational aspects of diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism; identifying implicit stereotypes;

and addressing microaggression, disrupting systemic oppression, dismantling White privilege, and implementing courageous conversations. Our largest ethnic demographic is Latino, at over 40 percent; White students are just below 40 percent, and other ethnicities make up the remaining 20 percent.

I strive to include considerations about who my students may be and how I might make the lessons more meaningful for them. This can range from simple changes of the images in our lecture material to the selection of texts and topics that may include intentional discussion about diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. I use royalty-free image sources to find images that show a wide range of ethnicities and cultures in illustrating my lessons. I also rearrange content to support cultural values. For example, because I know Latino culture emphasizes family, I moved signs related to family and taught them earlier in my class. I moved ages and birthdays from ASL 2 to ASL 1 as well because families and friends

Below: Students proudly show their printed and bound copies of the poetry chapbooks they wrote and designed (Spring 2013).



often make plans around birthdays. I included gender neutral and affirmative signs for LGBTQIA2+ students.

When looking beyond conventional sources, ASL content can be amazingly rich in cultural diversity. For both my ASL and English courses, I include different signing styles through online video media, along with various topics that are emphasized among marginalized peoples. I include the landmark film *Signing Black in America* (2021) by Black Deaf scholars, along with videos of Black storytellers and performers. I include talk show episodes and panel viewings of Deaf Latino and Hispanic people and their discussions related to holidays, art, and business. I seek out spotlights and explorations of life through the lens of Deaf Asians and Pacific Islanders via various internet video series. I include commentary and skits from LGBTQIA2+ advocates and performers. I share comparisons of different sign languages from Native American and other Indigenous communities. I seek out ancillary material by Deaf content creators on social media.

As my curation of educational material evolves, my students' queries and responses hold the most weight in what I select for inclusion in my class. I get a lot of questions about vocabulary from my deaf and hard of hearing students, especially when they encounter multiple meanings and nuance in word choice. I also get a lot of questions about how to sign concepts related to cultural foods, clothing, and style. I once went off topic for an entire session because the students happened to be all female and they wanted to learn signs for makeup, such as nail polish, foundation, blush, lipstick, eyeliner, eyeshadow, mascara, and fake eyelashes, including magnetic eyelashes.

I have never had a problem

A Wish List for Further Professional Development

By Sara Stallard

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In an ongoing quest for equity, I have compiled a wish list of professional development opportunities that I intend to seek out and that others interested in equity in the classroom might find useful.

- **Ungrading approaches**—I anticipate moving toward ungrading practices because I would like my students' work to be assessed more longitudinally; their skills should increase in proficiency toward the end of the semester. If they struggle with skills early on but eventually master them, why should they not receive full credit for this even if they made numerous errors previously?
- **Mental health and disability services**—I have noticed an increase in students self-reporting mental health issues or disabilities, or both. Some students seem to lack strategies for handling stressful learning experiences. In addition, students experience a huge lag in obtaining disability status that allows them to receive accommodations or support services. We need to close those gaps, and we need to remove the stigma associated with counseling and care.
- **Language deprivation**—Language deprivation needs to be recognized and clearly described as one of the causes behind marginalization of deaf and hard of hearing people. Do deaf and hard of hearing students have access to language that is accessible, interactive, and abundant? As a byproduct of a culture that traditionally refused to recognize the importance of ASL and Deaf culture, language deprivation needs to be emphasized in learning about and understanding Deaf cultural values. We need to ensure hearing ASL students know how they can serve as advocates and allies, especially when they become paraprofessionals, service providers, interpreters, or educators working with deaf and hard of hearing people.
- **Political advocacy**—I want to learn more strategies involving political leverage as I suspect we will need to become stronger advocates for high-quality public education in the United States as well as for specialized education. ASL courses for hearing students exist in many high schools and colleges, yet deaf and hard of hearing students continue to experience linguistic marginalization in public school settings, which may also occur in addition to marginalization related to race or other minority status. This is further compounded by the shifting landscape of education in this country, where political agendas impact education policy which can put all students at risk, especially when equitable practices get rolled back or removed altogether.
- **Open Education Resources (OERs)**—This is an area that I believe needs more attention in the education of deaf and hard of hearing students. OERs can reduce economic and racial inequities. Given that 70 percent of college students reported housing, food insecurity, or homelessness (California Community Colleges #RealCollege Survey 2019 report, p. 10) and that the high costs of textbooks were reported as the leading cause for students to struggle with their studies, OERs—and zero costs for textbooks—are major focuses in California's community colleges. I serve as the ASL lead in liaising with the central statewide committee responsible for disbursing funds for grants to develop OERs, and I plan to focus much of my professional development on OER-related topics for the next few years.



Above: Members of the Clerc Center's National Deaf Education Center cheer as they wrap up the webinar they hosted for parents and families (Fall 2017).

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understanding signers with long colorful nails, and I once told other professionals that expecting short, unpolished nails could be considered racist and discriminatory toward women. Speaking up was not comfortable for me. Everyone in the group was White, I was one of only two women, and the other participating professionals were also my

colleagues, making the conversation feel riskier yet also more necessary. Two years later, I felt relieved and empowered when I saw the topic of fingernails being discussed among ASL content creators, and Black Deaf creators and deaf and hearing Black interpreters were blunt about fingernails being part of their identity.

Now and Beyond

I'm grateful I work in an educational setting in which faculty expertise is encouraged. Annual professional development requirements for full-time faculty include a mix of mandated topics and "flex" options that recently were amended to allow for up to 12 hours of self-selected material related to

our disciplines. I was thrilled because this means I can view ASL-based content such as the National Association of the Deaf's "Real Talk, Good Action" panels as part of professional development. Recently I applied for and was awarded a small grant to fund travel abroad that enabled me to learn some *Lengua Señas Mexicana* (LSM) or Mexican Sign Language and to learn more about Latino culture. With this knowledge, I can introduce students to LSM along with ASL and help direct their interest toward resources and opportunities beyond my classroom.

I anticipate that professional development will continue to inform my work, especially in best practices for diversity, equity, inclusion, and anti-racism. I especially would love to collaborate more with other educators and community members who are part of the ASL and Deaf "ecosystems" as we continue to enrich the learning experiences of deaf and hard of hearing students, as well as the hearing students who will become allies, in ways that are truly equitable.

Thanks to this ongoing professional development, I feel confident that I can create meaningful learning experiences for deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students in both ASL and English.



Above: MSSD alumnus Emmanuel Perrodin-Njoku is flanked by his fellow MSSD alumni at a ceremony at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where he received the Outstanding Undergraduate Scholar award for being in the top 1 percent of his class. In this photo, they are fingerspelling M-S-S-D. Stallard also attended the ceremony, during which she received a certificate of appreciation as Perrodin-Njoku's Honored Teacher (Spring 2018).