Transcending "Conversing":
A Deaf Student in the Writing Center

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Writing centers developed in the 1970s to provide an alternative to the traditional classroom environment. Whereas the traditional classroom presupposes on the hierarchical relationship between teacher/student, the writing center changes the social context of learning by creating an environment of peer collaboration. Writing center tutors facilitate this environment by encouraging students to enter what Kenneth Bruffee calls "the conversation of mankind." Rather than remaining passive recipients of knowledge, students are encouraged to collaboratively articulate their understanding with their peers. As such, the writing center serves as a place for individuals to converse. Bruffee views conversing (not writing) as the writing center's primary purpose:

What peer tutor and tutee do together is not write or edit, or least of all proofread. What they do together is converse. They converse about the subject and about the assignment. They converse about, in an academic context, their own relationship and the relationships between student and teacher. Most of all they converse about and pursuant to writing. (10)

Like most writing staff members, I had accepted this characterization of our work place. Conversing was the activity which best described my tutoring sessions with students. I accepted speaking and hearing as necessary criteria for participation in the writing center. When I began working with Anissa, though, I was forced to re-examine these criteria. Conversing did not describe the activity of our tutoring sessions. Very few of our sessions involved speaking and none involved hearing. Rather, we relied on seeing. We watched each other's facial expressions, we read each other's written words, and we observed each other's nonverbal gestures. These methods of communication allowed Anissa and me to have productive tutoring sessions without speaking or hearing—a necessity as Anissa is congenitally deaf.

What follows is a narrative of my interactions with Anissa. Working with her led me to question the writing center's purpose as "conversing." Bruffee's metaphor continues the bias of a society of hearing individuals. An "audist" society inhibits those without speech or hearing from full participation. So although the writing center has historically viewed itself as an inclusive place—a place which encourages multi-culturalism and different learning styles—it also
sends messages of an exclusive nature to those who are hearing-impaired. By assuming the "conversing" metaphor, the writing center excludes people like Anissa whose linguistic abilities are founded on different principles of social interaction.

A Student Who Needs to be "Pushed"

Last Spring an Art History faculty member called my attention to Anissa. She prefaced her remarks by stating, "this student will probably not pass my class without some significant assistance in writing." During the phone conversation, she revealed that Anissa is a Graphic Design major who has been deaf since birth. She has no hearing in either ear, but can occasionally hear vibrations with hearing aids. Despite being a superb lip reader, Anissa still needs an interpreter and note-taker in all of her classes.

After providing these preliminary facts, the faculty member asked if I thought the student's hearing loss could be a factor in her poor writing performance. Not knowing anyone in Anissa's situation, I suggested that she contact a specialist in the Communication Disorders Department. During the next day, I received the following e-mail message:

I talked with a woman in Communication Disorders and she confirmed that it is often difficult for hearing impaired individuals to write very well. She indicated that the type of sign language that they use can greatly affect how they write. I think Anissa's problem has more to do with conceptualizing than it does with ability to express. (I checked this out with another faculty member who had her as a student in Graphic Design.) This faculty member indicated that Anissa had a very hard time—that she took criticism very, very hard, but that the faculty member had pushed Anissa hard enough to get her to the level of most students in the class by its end. (Anissa had to do one project over 8 times.) My inclination would be that she needs to read others' ideas and then try to express them in her own words.

Regardless of the advice from the woman in Communication Disorders, this faculty member identified Anissa's problem as "having more to do with conceptualizing than with the ability to express." That is, according to this teacher, Anissa had the ability to write but just did not put enough thought into her writing. The faculty member's decision to mention Anissa's experience last semester suggested that she concurred with her colleague in Graphic Design who believed Anissa's poor writing performance was a result of her lack of motivation. Anissa needed to be "pushed."

This characterization of Anissa reflected both faculty members' audist perspectives. Accepting the majority paradigm, Anissa's poor writing performance could not be attributed to her hearing loss because she had, it seemed, learned English. Anissa lipreads and "speaks" English. Whereas non-native speakers of English are beginners, Anissa was not considered a beginner. If she made a grammatical error, it had to reflect carelessness because, unlike ESL students, she should have already learned the concept through years of using "English." However, Anissa uses American Sign Language (ASL). These faculty
members erroneously identified English as Anissa’s language. English is the language she speaks within the larger audist society; she uses ASL, which she acquired as her first language, to communicate with other deaf individuals. In short, these faculty accepted the audist assumption that a language must be spoken for it to be recognized as a language.

Disregarding ASL as the basis of Anissa’s use of language performance, the faculty members perceived her writing difficulties erroneously. They concluded Anissa had reduced ability to conceptualize/think, thus showing their assumptions. Traditionally, hearing-impaired individuals have been labeled as deaf and “dumb.” One connotation of “dumb” is that to be without a spoken language is to be without intelligence—without the ability to think. Yet this inability has not been recognized as a biologically-grounded mental deficiency. Rather, it is often taken to be a sign of moral character. In Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture, Carol Padden and Tom Humphries discuss the public image most associated with deaf people. This is an image of individuals who are “lazy” (46). The image has developed as a result of the increasing number of able-bodied deaf peddlers who solicit donations from the public. These peddlers often serve as the only form of interaction between the hearing public and the deaf community. They alone are taken as representative of the work ethic of those who are hearing-impaired. As a result, the hearing community assumes that the deaf need to be “pushed.” Without being “pushed,” they will remain unmotivated. As the faculty member explained to me, Anissa was able to pass her Graphic Design class last semester only because a hearing teacher pushed her to the level. Furthermore, Anissa would only be able to pass her Art History course this semester if I (the Director of the Writing Center) pushed her hard enough.

A Student with “Weak Thoughts”
During our first tutoring session (March 8), Anissa shared all of her writing thus far in the Art History course: her diagnostic essay and her first nine journal entries complete with teacher comments. At the bottom of her diagnostic essay, the professor had written, “Anissa—You’re going to need to work on your writing in order to do well in this class. I strongly encourage you to use the writing center. I’ll be glad to help you in any way that I can.” Following this written comment, the faculty member had given Anissa my name and told her that she should see me for help with her journal. The diagnostic essay was dated January 31, so despite the faculty member’s recommendation, Anissa had chosen not to seek my help until she had already completed nine entries and received feedback from the professor.

Anissa’s journal began with an entry which articulated what she saw as the role of the journal in her learning: “Today is the beginning of my journal as a major assignment for this Art History class. I hope this journal will help me to stimulate my thoughts.” By defining the journal as a method to stimulate her own thoughts, Anissa had added credibility to the faculty member’s assumption that
she was unmotivated and, thus, needed to “read others’ ideas and then try to express them in her own words.” However, although Anissa confirmed that the journal entries were to be her thoughts, she neglected to mention the role of books and articles in her thinking. This was not surprising, though, as the only place the faculty member actually mentioned books and articles was in a parenthetical phrase in the syllabus: “Since the purpose of this assignment is to encourage you to think, each entry must evidence thinking on your part about the ideas you are writing about. You will not be ‘graded’ on the correctness of your thoughts (with the exception of the entries on books and articles).”

Because Anissa recognized the emphasis on her thoughts, her second journal entry began, “I spent most of the day asking myself why art is so important in everyone’s lives.” In this short one-page entry, almost every sentence began with the phrase “I believe.” This was followed by a third entry which began “I spent most of the hour thinking how much information from the lecture that I was going to miss in class since it was the day of my grandmother’s funeral.” The entry discussed something that Anissa’s grandmother said to her about art before she died, and again, the entry included many sentences which began “I remember,” “I asked,” “I came,” and “I believe.” In the fourth entry, Anissa attempted to discuss something she had read in the class textbook: “While reading the ‘High Renaissance’ section in the book, I was fascinated by Michelangelo’s remarkable works.” This entry had a reduced number of sentences beginning with “I.” Only four sentences began “I was amazed,” “I would never have thought,” “I’m referring to,” and “I believe.”

Anissa received no feedback on these first four entries. It was not until the fifth entry that she received a written comment from the faculty member. In the fifth entry, Anissa compared two artistic styles. None of the sentences in this entry used “I.” Unfortunately, she did not provide any clue as to the origin of the ideas as she had in the previous entries. The originator was apparent, however, upon reading the faculty member’s comment written at the bottom of the entry: “careful—getting class to rehashing lectures.”

After this comment, Anissa’s journal entries reverted back to her earlier style of writing. The sixth entry made four references to “I’m asking,” “I can,” “I have to remember,” and “I need to,” followed by two more journal entries totaling fifteen sentences of “I feel,” “I believe,” “I think,” “I guess,” and “I wonder.” These three entries received only one comment written at the end of the eighth entry: “very weak entry; not much thought apparent.”

Apparently dismayed by this faculty comment, Anissa chose not to discuss an issue related to art in her ninth entry. Instead, she discussed her concern over progress thus far in the class: “It seems to me I tried to explain my answers; however, they didn’t come out as clear as I wanted them to. I hope I’ll do better ... because I can’t afford to fail.” This entry prompted the faculty member to observe, “I don’t understand the purpose of this entry; info isn’t part of class.”
Evidence of Thought

After examining these first nine journal entries and the faculty member’s comments, it appeared that Anissa and the faculty member were assuming, respectively, different things about what shows evidence of thought. Anissa equated thought with personal reflection while the teacher viewed personal reflection as evidence of little thought. The more the faculty member criticized Anissa’s writing as not showing much thought, the more Anissa used “I” in subsequent journal entries. Similarly, the more Anissa used “I,” the more the faculty member viewed the entries as “weak.” Their miscommunication centered around how Anissa chose to discuss ideas in her journal. Based on the information in her journal entries, Anissa had read the assigned readings. What was in question was the way she wrote about the material. She presented information in her journal entries without any clear indication as to the originator of the idea or by prefacing the idea with a first-person singular pronoun. Only in the third entry did Anissa indicate the originator of the ideas (e.g., grandmother), and this then was followed by no other references. All subsequent information was presented in the context of “I believe.” In the fourth entry, Anissa mentioned that she was responding to something in the text, but she does not indicate an author. This same difficulty was present in her newest journal entry—the entry she wanted to revise during our tutoring session.

In her newest journal entry, it was clear that Anissa was struggling with the concept of authorship. In particular, she had written three sentences which illustrated the difficulty she was experiencing when incorporating written texts into her own writing:

This writer believes that even the best artists do not use the hands following one’s own mind.

In the first reading of “The Model and the Statue,” the poem stated that Michelangelo claimed that artists should carve or design a figure or sculpture from one’s own mind.

In the second reading of “The Model and the Statue,” indicates that often artists sketch a figure down on paper.

In the first sentence, the subject suffered from ambiguity. It was unclear as to whom “the writer” referred: Anissa? Michelangelo? In the second sentence, Anissa assigned the poem rather than a subject credit for the information. In the third sentence, Anissa left out the subject. Because all three sentences revealed problems with the subject, it was clear that Anissa was not simply lazy. These ways of referring to the subject were not careless or typographical errors. Anissa had made deliberate decisions.

First Language Interference

Prior to my first tutoring session with Anissa (following the e-mail request), I had briefly investigated American Sign Language (ASL). ASL is not a set of individual gestures used by hearing-impaired individuals, as suggested by
Anissa's professor, but is a highly structured system with its own vocabulary and syntax. ASL is not based on, nor derived from, English. Signs and words may have overlapping meanings, but the sentence structure into which they are placed differs dramatically. As Peggy Marron identifies in "Tutoring a Deaf Student: Another View," "sign language is very different from written English. Articles are not used; tenses are usually not shown; plurals are shown by repeating a sign or are indicated by context." Because ASL has a distinctive structure, some universities give foreign language credit to students fluent in ASL. In a practical sense, ASL is considered to be a spoken language. The deaf acquire ASL, not English, as a first language. Consequently, Anissa's first language is not English. Her first language is ASL. Like other non-native speakers of English, Anissa has learned English but has yet to reach a level of mastery equivalent to a native English speaker. She still must rely on an interpreter who translates the faculty member's spoken English into "spoken" ASL.

The most obvious distinction between ASL and English is the means by which each language is used. While ASL and English are both spoken, only English can be written. At the present, no method exists for recording ASL in written form. It is not surprising, therefore, that ASL has features associated with oral speech communities.

Shirley Brice Heath investigated the characteristics of oral communication patterns. She discovered that story-telling followed a similar structure regardless of community. The story-teller/author tells stories only about him/herself or someone else who was present at the time of the storytelling. Heath explains, "stories told on someone other than the story-teller are never told unless the central character or someone who is clearly designated his representative is present." As the author or subject is always present, no method of identification is needed for the author. Similarly, ASL does not have a sign for "author." "Author" is not included among the 4,400 signs listed in the American Sign Language Dictionary. No particular sign exists for pronouns either. According to Humphries and Padden's A Basic Course in Sign Language, "if the person or object is visible or nearby, the signer points in the direction of that person or object. If the person or object is not present, the signer points to a location on either side." Consequently, if a signer is telling a story about someone who is not present, the author is forced to use an unclear referent—pointing off in another direction. No mechanism exists to indicate if this "pointing" refers to he, she, or it. Thus, the concept of pronouns in written English presents some difficulty for fluent speakers of ASL.

In Deafness, Development, and Literacy, Alec Webster concludes, "the most important feature in the writing of the deaf is the difficulty in linking sentences together." Webster attributes part of this difficulty to the deaf's use of pronouns in written English. Rather than substituting a pronoun to refer back to words used earlier, hearing-impaired individuals assume that the redundancy is self-evident; therefore, they often do not restate the subject. ESL specialist Alice Horning suggests that this lack of redundancy is common among those learning written English.
In Anissa's case, she recognized the need to rearticulate the subject but struggled with the appropriate means. Each one of the problematic sentences in her newest entry (see page 245) attempted to imply the subject without actually stating it (e.g., Michelangelo). This was necessary because the subject/author was not present. If Anissa was to follow proper etiquette within her oral-based culture, she could not tell Michelangelo's "story" without his presence. Therefore, Anissa resorted to telling the "story" from her own vantage point because she was present. Unlike her earlier journal entries, though, Anissa chose in the first problematic sentence to use "this writer believes" rather than "I believe" to refer to herself. Based on the comment she received from the faculty member on her ninth journal entry ("info isn't part of class"), Anissa chose to replace the personal pronoun with a third-person subject. This increased the likelihood that her audience would interpret the text's meaning through their own experiences and, thus, see the meaning as relevant. Each reader could situate him/herself into the generic category of "writer" whereas "I" limited the referent to Anissa. Characteristic of the oral tradition, Anissa reshaped the written text so that it was guided by communication assumptions of ASL speakers.

On glancing at the third problematic sentence, it appeared that Anissa had accidentally left out the subject. However, this structure actually reflected interference from her first language. In ASL, statements such as "My wife has a new job" and "My wife, she has a new job" are spoken using the identical signs. The only variation occurs in the accompanying facial expressions. The second statement uses a topic marker to restate the subject. This topic marker is represented by raised eyebrows (Humphries and Padden 92). Without being able to use eyebrows, Anissa's written sentence structure in English appeared to leave out the subject. However, if translated into ASL, the noun of the initial phrase ("The Model and the Statue") would automatically become the subject of the sentence. Thus, this reflected the same structure as her second sentence. Within the second problematic sentence, Anissa used "the poem" as her subject. In both sentences, she attributed the ideas to the poem rather than to Michelangelo. Not only did she attribute the idea to the poem, she also endowed the poem with speaking ability.

An Audist Center of Reference
For people immersed in an audist culture, this personification of the poem may seem "unthoughtful." Anissa neglects the fine distinctions between the abilities of an inanimate object and an animate subject. She does not acknowledge spoken language as the distinguishing characteristic of humankind.

For the audist community, the oral form of discourse (conversing) is at the center. The mouth is typically recognized as the originating point of language and the ear as the receptive point of language. Everything is interpreted in relationship to this framework. For example, while reading may not appear to be tied to an aural culture, buried assumptions exist about the process of reading/writing. In "Deafness and Insight: The Deafened Moment as a Critical Modal-
Lennard Davis points out that "the way we discuss reading and writing has in fact implied the ostracism of those who are differently-abled linguistically" (883). Reading and writing are perceived as processes dependent upon hearing and vocalizing. The most obvious indication of these buried assumptions is the way the act of reading is defined. The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines reading as an activity "to understand language by interpreting written symbols for speech sounds; to utter aloud written or printed words." This definition promotes the idea that people read by imagining words into sound. In fact, when children first learn to read, emphasis is placed on phonics. They are told to "sound it out" in their oral reading groups. Even the whole language movement encourages students to first "tell" their stories. In more advanced classes, students are encouraged not only to imagine words into sound, but also to imagine or pretend authors into presence. Because presence/participation in an audist society is predicated on an individual's ability to speak and hear, students learn how to use words such as "states," "says," and "articulates" to create a subject's presence within a written text. These audist assumptions are further magnified in the writing center where a prerequisite for improving writing is the ability to "converse." Writers in the writing center are encouraged to read their papers aloud so as to "hear" problems.

**DEAF as a Center of Reference**

Anissa forced me to re-examine the epistemological bases the audist community has imposed on hearing-impaired individuals. Edward Sapir, an important modern linguist, hypothesized that if people speak a different language, they also live in a different world. Having grown up within a deaf household, Lennard Davis explains, "the Deaf feel that their culture, language, and community constitute a totally adequate, self-enclosed, and self-defining sub-nationality within the larger structure of the audist state" (881). As a result, the deaf often have a different center of reference for interpretation than an audist culture. Padden and Humphries provide an example of how this center of reference can result in different interpretations. For audists, A-LITTLE HARD-OF-HEARING means a person who can hear quite well and VERY HARD-OF-HEARING means someone who cannot hear well at all. For the hearing-impaired, A LITTLE HARD-OF-HEARING means a person who has slight hearing and VERY HARD-OF-HEARING means someone who can hear quite well. This deviation in meaning occurs because both cultures are using a different center of reference. In many cases such as this one, the deviation can result in a complete reversal of meaning. Padden and Humphries explain,

In ASL, as in English, HARD-OF-HEARING represents a deviation of some kind. Someone who is A-LITTLE HARD-OF-HEARING has a smaller deviation than someone who is VERY HARD-OF-HEARING ... yet the terms have opposite meanings in the two languages. ... DEAF, not HEARING, is taken as the central point of reference. A-LITTLE HARD-OF-HEARING is a small deviation from DEAF. (41)
Padden and Humphries discovered this deviation by observing a football game between two deaf schools. Members of the home team kept referring to the opposing team as HEARING despite the team’s lack of hearing. For them, HEARING did not refer to a physiological condition as much as a recognition that the other team was the opposite of them: the “Other.”

A Tutoring Session
Recognizing that Anissa uses a different center of reference, I began our session by showing Anissa reviews of texts. I emphasized that these reviews were written by hearing individuals. I pointed to the places where the authors of the texts were mentioned, phrases like “the faculty who speak in this book.” I also pointed to the place in her third journal entry where she had referred to a speaking subject (e.g., her grandmother). Next, I took a pencil to her second sentence and crossed out “the poem stated.” This left the sentence to read, “In the first reading of ‘The Model and the Statue,’ Michelangelo claimed that artists should carve or design a figure of sculpture from one’s own mind.” I then pointed to the next problematic sentence, inserted a blank line to indicate that the subject was missing (“In the second reading of ‘The Model and the Statue,’ __ indicates that often artists sketch a figure down on paper.”), and asked Anissa “who?” Almost immediately, Anissa wrote “Michelangelo” in the blank space. In reference to the first sentence (“This writer believes that even the best artists do not use the hands following one’s own mind.”), I asked Anissa if “this writer” referred to her. Vehemently she shook her head and changed “this writer” to “Michelangelo” and “believes” to “suggested.”

What fascinated me was Anissa’s decision to change both the subject and the verb in this sentence. Upon re-examining the previous journal entries, I noticed that she only used the verb “believe” in conjunction with “I.” She had continually used this particular verb when discussing others’ ideas. Using “I believe” provided Anissa with a means to express someone else’s ideas without having the person present. Ironically, Anissa was actually doing exactly what the professor had told me she wanted Anissa to do: “read others’ ideas and then try to express them in her own words.” Attaching “I believe” was the only method Anissa had for expressing others’ ideas in her own words.

Unfortunately, this form of overtaking others’ ideas was interpreted as if she had authored the ideas. Once she recognized that in an audist society ideas are attributed to an author even if s/he is not present, Anissa added a subject. But instead of using audist verbs like “stated,” “said,” “articulated,” all of the verbs she chose to use (“claimed,” “indicated,” “suggested”) referred to not necessarily oral activities. So although Anissa had inserted a subject, she had not endowed the author with the ability to speak. This method allowed her to bypass the audist assumptions of the author “speaking.” Taking DEAF, not HEARING, as the central point of reference negated the need for an author who speaks because readers like Anissa do not hear. I could not hide my excitement; neither could she. We both realized that she had discovered a method for acknowledging the
author which did not rely on the “conversing” metaphor. She could make the necessary distinction between an author’s ideas and her own ideas without feeling ostracized by an audist culture.

Because the distinction between self and other is determined by the scene rather than language in her first language (ASL), Anissa had to discover a method to distinguish between self and other in written English. Unlike native speakers of English who are members of an audist culture, Anissa had no linguistic habit of making the distinction between self and other comprehensible in English. Her conversations all occur face-to-face rather than by aural means (i.e., on the phone, from another remote location). Therefore, Anissa had to develop a way to mark the distinction in her writing. For her the ways of acknowledging the distinction were not self-evident as they were for writers immersed in an audist society. Hearing individuals assume that the writer is the originator of the ideas in the text, so “I believe” is not necessary to include. For Anissa, though, “I believe” is necessary.

Out of curiosity, I asked Anissa to write another sentence stating what she believes. She wrote the following: “I believe that Michelangelo and other sculptors are not identical because Michelangelo used his own ideas to create sculptures of beauty while the other sculptors used their own sketches to create their works.” This was the first statement Anissa had written that used both “I believe” and a subject. She acknowledged both presences within the same sentence. As a result, “I believe” was transformed into a marker for Anissa’s thoughts rather than a linguistic substitute for a subject.

**Afterthoughts**

Throughout the semester, Anissa and I continued to explore the hidden audist assumptions in the reading/writing process. Rather than resisting the assumptions, she and I deliberately attempted to transcend our different centers of reference. As a result, Anissa’s writing became more like the writing of native speakers of English and my tutoring focused less on conversing. Anissa concluded her journal by suggesting that the writing center (a place which has historically magnified the hidden assumptions of the audist community by privileging “conversing”) can provide “wonderful encouragement to deaf students in the years to come.” The faculty member concluded the semester by sending me the following e-mail message: “After talking with you, it seems very likely that her [Anissa’s] hearing impairment was affecting her performance.”

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Works Cited


Winterowd Award Winners Announced

The annual W. Ross Winterowd Award for the most outstanding book on composition theory published in 1995 was awarded to Xin Liu Gale for Teachers, Discourses, and Authority in the Postmodern Composition Classroom.

The 1994 W. Ross Winterowd Award was awarded to Jasper Neel for Aristotle's Voice: Rhetoric, Theory, and Writing in America.

This annual award was generously endowed by Professor Winterowd. The selection committee was chaired by Julie Drew. Professor Winterowd presented the 1995 awards during the Association of Teachers of Advanced Composition meeting at the CCCC Convention in Milwaukee.

Send nominations for the 1995 W. Ross Winterowd Award to Thomas Kent, editor; JAC; Department of English; Iowa State University; Ames, IA 50011.