Deafness, Literacy, Rhetoric: Legacies of Language and Communication

Almost since its inception the education of deaf people has been marred by divisive controversy concerning the most appropriate modes of communication.

—Margret Winzer, The History of Special Education

... an inability or unwillingness to deal with deaf children in terms of their own needs and capabilities. In 1880 this was understandable, as education for deaf children was in its infancy. But in the 1970s?

—Richard Winefield, Never the Twain Shall Meet

I think the boundary [between deaf and hearing] is made up by society, the educational system. What caused the separation? I think education, the system.

—Ellen, Gallaudet graduate and American Sign Language teacher

“Deafness is a big country,” writes Owen Wrigley in one of his chapter titles in The Politics of Deafness, as he seeks to ethnographically document the “land,” the “absent anchor,” of the people who belong to the culture he writes about—the culture of the Deaf. For all its nonexistence in chartable, tangible terms, the territory of “deafness” looms large. It is, as I now look out, simply huge; its terrain is vastly diverse and the possibilities for negotiating and navigating in it—or around it—abound. Maps are many. And both their multitude and their various and often conflicting representations guarantee that the going might in fact be made harder by using them.
The resources and richness of the land, too, are not diminished by physical absence: there is precious ore to be mined here. The size of its population alone guarantees that. Depending on different accounts, on which map is consulted and what criteria for establishing “deafness” are used, the count varies: from 15 million worldwide—“on par with a modest size nation” when commitment to cultural Deafness is the marker in one rendering; to 13.3 million in the United States (or 6.5 million or even 1.7 million, depending on which specific terms and classifications are used to define deafness); to 21 million in the United States by yet another definition. These are just some of the available sets of figures.2

Despite the diversity and preciousness of its resources, there are also dangerous subterranean mines in this country—mines long abandoned and not carefully marked, mines boarded shut, with warnings of “Danger! Keep out!” There are land mines as well, in a potentially explosively field. The promise and perils of educating deaf students have been (and continue to be) laid out in such possibly active minefields. Education matters, literacy matters—sometimes violently.3 Furthermore, education and matters of literacy explode (like the “stop,” the “plosive,” the most articulate of our speech sounds) on the figurative tongue of deafness, when we look at (lipread?) the rhetorical constructions of deafness.

The ways I might look at the rhetorical constructions of deafness in education are many—frames, maps, primers, and the like prove plentiful. I might, for example, abbreviate most of the longer histories I have encountered, creating my own rhetoric and literacy-minded chronology:

**A (PARTIAL) HISTORY OF DEAF EDUCATION**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ca. 355 B.C.E.</td>
<td>Aristotle (<em>Politics</em>) advocates infanticide for “deformed” children; Cicero follows suit in 55 B.C.E.</td>
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<td>380–420 C.E.</td>
<td>St. Augustine of Hippo claims “Faith comes by hearing” and excludes deaf persons from Christian faith</td>
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<td>533</td>
<td>The Code of Justinian classifies deaf persons (both separately and among all other disabled persons)</td>
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<td>1578</td>
<td>Pedro Ponce de León undertakes educating deaf Spanish nobility</td>
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<td>1662</td>
<td>The Royal Society of London inspires inquiry into the nature of language and the teaching of deaf and blind persons</td>
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<td>1720</td>
<td>Daniel Defoe writes <em>The History of the Life and Surprising Adventures of Mr. Duncan Campbell</em>—the first popular book about the lives of deaf persons</td>
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<tr>
<td>1745</td>
<td>Jacob Rodrigues Pereire begins working with deaf students</td>
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1751 Diderot publishes his study on deaf people
1760 Abbé Charles Michel de l'Épée founds the Institute for the Deaf in Paris
1779 Pierre Desloges, a deaf man, defends deaf education based on sign language in a widely circulated pamphlet
1789 Abbé Sicard takes over the Institute for the Deaf in Paris
1799 Jean-Marc Itard, trying out the language philosophies of Condillac, begins working with "Victor," a feral boy who cannot speak and is kept at the Institute for the Deaf in Paris
1817 The Reverend Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet opens the Connecticut Asylum for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons (first American school for the deaf); educates Alice Cogswell, a deaf girl; and introduces manual methods for deaf education
1850s Printing becomes popular trade for deaf persons (primarily through training in trade schools)
1851 Thomas Gallaudet founds first American church for the deaf
1857 Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb and the Blind is incorporated on two acres of land in Washington, D.C.
1864 National Deaf Mute College (also known as Columbia Institution for the Deaf and Dumb) founded in Washington, D.C. (later Gallaudet College, then Gallaudet University)
1864 Alexander Melville Bell designs "Visible Speech"
1867 Clarke Institution founded (premier oralist school) and full-fledged campaign for oral methods begins
1871 First successful aural surgery
1871 Alexander Graham Bell begins teaching his father's method, "Visible Speech," to deaf students
1880 Milan Conference, an international meeting of educators of the deaf, outlaws use of sign language (manual methods) to teach deaf students
1883 A. G. Bell delivers and a year later publishes *Memoirs upon the Formation of a Deaf Variety of the Human Race*, a eugenicist tract decrying the marriage of (and potential child-rearing by) deaf couples
1886 A. G. Bell tests hearing of Washington, D.C., students (first audiograms)
1890s A. G. Bell and Edward Miner Gallaudet lead "communications debate" between oralism and manualism, respectively
1893 National Deaf Mute College renamed Gallaudet College at the request of the alumni association
1895  A. G. Bell and E. M. Gallaudet square off at Convention of American Instructors of the Deaf

1909  First compulsory school attendance laws for deaf (and blind) children enacted

1954  By an act of Congress, the corporate name of the Columbia Institution becomes Gallaudet College

1958  Public Law 85-926 provides grants for training special education personnel

1963  The Division of Handicapped Children and Youth is established within the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare

1969  Model Secondary School for the Deaf (MSSD) established on Gallaudet’s campus

1970  Kendall Demonstration Elementary School (KDES) established on Gallaudet’s campus; “Deaf Studies” chair established at Gallaudet

1975  Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, is passed by Congress

1980s  Like most U.S. colleges, Gallaudet has significant enrollment increase; cochlear implants offered

1986  Gallaudet College becomes Gallaudet University; the Education of the Deaf Act (PL 99-371) signed

1988  “Deaf President Now” protest—students close Gallaudet University campus; Irving King Jordan becomes first deaf president of Gallaudet University; Philip Bravin becomes first deaf chairman of the Board of Trustees

1989  International “Deaf Way Conference and Festival” held at Gallaudet

1990  Harvey Corson appointed as Gallaudet’s first deaf provost

1990  The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) signed into law

1990  PL 94-142 revised and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

1993–present  Gallaudet University enrollment begins to decline—federal funding declines and programs, services, personnel, departments are cut

1998  Gallaudet students actively campaign to replace a recently reelected English Department chair, purportedly because of her politics and pedagogy in literacy instruction

Sources: Gannon, Deaf Heritage; “Gallaudet”; Gallaudet, History of the College; Winzer, History of Special Education: From Isolation to Integration; and my own memory. I repeat that this list is partial, in all senses of the word: it selects for events that line up with my own senses of rhetoric and of literacy education.
Histories are surely useful, but they can also carry a rhetoric all their own in their partiality, in their “official” disguise, in their tendencies to cast change as “progress” moving toward things always bigger and better, and, finally, in their penchant for not being a history of the people even as they are about that group of people. And since my own proclivities and training have centered far more on qualitative research and a cultural studies approach to rhetoric than on historical research, I have not followed a historical map. Yet my vision has been imprinted by more than enough variant renderings of “deaf history” and “the history of deaf education.”

I might, too, have undertaken a study of the rhetoric of deaf education by surveying relevant terms and categories, by examining the production and utility of all the labels and landmarks in the vast land of “deafness.” The topographical variety is certainly not lacking here: deaf; hard-of-hearing; hearing-impaired; the silents; deaf and dumb; dumb; mute; limited hearing; auditorially impaired; acoustically handicapped; disabled; handicapped; prelingually, postlingually, or prevocationally deaf; mild, moderate, severe, or profound hearing loss; binaural, sensorineural, conductive, mixed, or central hearing loss; the least restrictive environment; appropriate placement; special needs; full or partial integration; self-contained classrooms; inclusion; audiological, psychological, occupational, physical, communicative, and social “assessment teams”; parent education; aural/oral rehabilitation; speech therapy; lipreading; speechreading; cued speech; fingerspelling; simultaneous communication (SimCom); total communication (TC); Pidgin Sign English (PSE); Signed English; Signing Exact English (SEE); American Sign Language (ASL); bilingual-bicultural (Bi-Bi); support services—note takers, interpreters (oral or sign language), tutors, FM loop systems, closed and open captioning, telecommunications devices (TTYs/TDDs), telephone relay services, real-time transcriptions, light alarm systems, bed shakers; resource rooms; hearing aids—in-ear, behind-the-ear, digitally programmable; cochlear implants; mainstreaming; residential institute; day institute; technical and trade institutes.4

Enough. To be certain, rhetoric is fond of terms, categories, division, classifications. We have Aristotle, first and foremost, to thank for that. But while I will be more than a little concerned with the production, reception, and utility of terms, I do not want to make them the focus of my discussion. Rather than turn to the text, as Aristotle might prefer, and analyze the terms on its page, I favor a more process-centered and person-dominated over a product-centered and strictly linguistic approach.
Michael Oliver and others in disability studies might call this a "sociological approach," and Kenneth Bruffee and others in composition and rhetoric studies might call it "social constructionist"; I choose to call it a rhetorical-cultural approach. I want to consider where (and who) the terms come from, the social and rhetorical milieu surrounding their inception and usage, how they are used, and, certainly, who they are used on as well as how those persons react to them.

I could have proceeded by conducting a critical rhetorical study of those who "serve" in the "deaf education system" (what Harlan Lane has called, disapprovingly, "the audist establishment"). That is, I could have looked at the acts, words, and values of any of the following who work with and depend for income on deaf persons: audiologists, hearing aid salespersons, ear-nose-throat specialists and surgeons, speech pathologists, speech therapists, aural (and/or oral) rehabilitation specialists, school psychologists and counselors, social workers, interpreters, parents with deaf children, special education teachers, deaf education teachers, English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers, "regular" classroom teachers who encounter deaf students in mainstreamed situations, genetic counselors, school principals and superintendents (of both deaf residential and mainstreamed programs), English and American Sign Language teachers in particular, academic counselors, coaches, tutors, job counselors, literacy workers, civil rights and disability lawyers. Again, we have a long list that is both incomplete and daunting. This list—these persons and their work and lives in relation to those of deaf persons—is promising, too, for rhetorical analysis.

But still, I'm headed elsewhere in this chapter—headed to some "place" where the terms and people interact. And in heading there, I would surely have to pass by or through—perhaps even stay in—the lives of deaf students. My map codes them as the indigenous population of the country of deafness, long since taken over by terms, traders, teachers, missionaries, lawyers, medical practitioners, scientists, politicians—colonists all, if you will. By and large their colonial enterprise has been situated around issues of (il)literacy—literacy of and for the deaf, the illiteracy that is often equated with deafness. This colonial form of literacy is one of "other people's children," as Lisa Delpit characterizes it, a literacy usually advocated and carried through "with the best of intentions by middle-class [and usually white, and usually hearing] liberal educators."
So it is that—as a white, middle-class, liberal, but not very hearing educator—I turn my discussion of the rhetorical construction of deafness (as a disability) in our educational system to “literacy.” In using literacy as my frame, my lens, and indeed my photo I hope to superimpose, quadruply expose—and simultaneously lay side by side—all four of the possible maps I’ve just considered: the history of deaf education, the terms of and in the deaf educational system, the people “giving” to the deaf educational system (who are, of course, doing plenty of taking, too), and, finally, the people “taking” from the system (the deaf students who irrefutably give as well).

In constructing this rhetorical-cultural map within the grids of literacy, I cannot avoid the significant “problem of speaking for others”; I realize that “the neutrality of the theorizer can no longer, can never again, be sustained, even for a moment.” I would not pretend otherwise. But still, I must write (which I also submit is different than speaking), and I must theorize and go about “naming silenced lives.” I try to do it with sensitivity to those silences, with respect for the ruptures that even I have surely created within the system and within the lives of those who work in the mines of deaf education and of those, too, who try to navigate through its minefields. In some ways I am each of them; in some ways, I am not any of them.

My combinatorial method is thus somewhat Ciceronian—the Cicero who opens the second book of *De Inventione* (2.1). Here he relates the story of the “citizens of Croton” who sought out a famous painter (Zeuxis of Heraclea) to paint for them “a picture of Helen so that the portrait though silent and lifeless might embody the surpassing beauty of womanhood.” Zeuxis proceeded by gathering all the city’s most beautiful women, then selecting the five most beautiful from among them “because he did not think all the qualities which he sought to combine in a portrayal of beauty could be found in one person.” Thus, his finished portrait was a beautiful composite representing a beauty, Helen. Cicero follows this example in writing about rhetoric: “In a similar fashion when the inclination arose in my mind to write a text-book of rhetoric, I did not set before myself some one model which I thought necessary to reproduce in all details, of whatever sort they might be, but after collecting all the works on the subject, I excerpted what seemed the most suitable precepts from each, and so culled the flower of many minds.”
In similar fashion, when the inclination arose in my mind to write a book about the rhetorical constructions of deafness it seemed that the most gifted of speakers and writers in the classical period, Cicero, might serve well enough as my model. My portrayal here is surely neither the most true nor most false (nor the most beautiful): it is a composite of excerpts—relying on personal interviews and published materials, collected works, and suitable (and perhaps unsuitable) precepts. In that composite sketch, the three sections that follow redraw, rhetorically, the territory of deafness as a disability in the nexus of literacy. First, I consider the “problem” of deafness in education from a rhetorical framework, taking Quintilian’s concept of the *vir bonus dicendi peritus* (the “good man [sic] speaking well”) as my cue. Second, at the heart of my own argument about deafness, literacy, and rhetoric, I explore a highly problematic conflation: what I call the “literacy legacy” of viewing literate acts (reading, writing, speaking, listening, gesturing) as either *language* or *communication*. Theories and practices of literacy—as either product or process, as oral or literate, as cross-cultural or community-based, or as academic or “critical”—come into consideration here, particularly as they intersect constructions of “deafness” in deaf education. Third, in an act of opening more than of closure, I turn to the subjects, turn to lend my ear to those who have been (or are being) educated in the deaf educational systems; I turn to see what signification they make, what maps they draw, of their own literate lives.

**When Education Falls on Deaf Ears**

As he begins book 12, which closes his voluminous *Institutio Oratoria*, the Roman educator and orator Quintilian turns back to the goal of the life-long rhetorical education he has just set forth in these synoptic books—he turns again to consideration of the *vir bonus*. Can this “good man speaking well,” wonders Quintilian, can this Perfect Orator be indeed a good person as well as a good speaker?

The answer to this question, claims Richard Lanham, “has under-written, and plagued, Western humanism from first to last”—both in our considerations of how citizens/students ought to be taught (indeed, even in educating “students” to become “citizens”) and in considering what they should be taught. Furthermore, in attempting to answer the question
“in the West from the Greeks onward,” Lanham posits that we have tended to offer two defenses. The first, “the Weak Defense,” simply begs the question, “argu[ing] that there are two kinds of rhetoric, good and bad. The good kind is used in good causes; the bad kind is bad. Our kind is the good kind; the bad kind is used by our opponents.” The second, and far more interesting and relevant for my own argument here, is the “Strong Defense,” which “assumes that truth is determined by social dramas, some more formal than others but all man-made. Rhetoric in such a world is not ornamental but determinative, essentially creative. Truth once created in this way becomes referential, as in legal precedent.”¹³

It is just such a “strong defense” for the goal of Western education at large—particularly, I believe, since the eighteenth century, with the rise of mass literacy—that has stood at the center of deaf education. It is no mere coincidence that deaf education and its concomitant social drama “came of age,” and have remained of age contentiously, at the point in Western history when literacy became more commonplace and education (a rhetorical education, at that) was made available beyond the aristocracy and clergy. Nor is it coincidence either that a tradition of educating “the good man speaking well” would come to see deafness as a puzzle at best, an ugly hole to fill at worst.

For how might deaf people come to be taught what was good if they could not hear the wisdom of the ages? This is a concern carried forward from St. Augustine, who interpreted the Pauline dictum “Faith comes by hearing” quite literally to mean that “those who are born deaf are incapable of ever exercising the Christian faith, for they cannot hear the Word, and they cannot read the Word.”¹⁴ If we carry this exclusion from the word of God over to exclusion from the “voice of reason” and then to exclusion from the word(s) of law and order that govern a land and its people, we see, as Lennard Davis has argued, that deaf citizens become, in their ignorance, “a threat to the ideas of nation, wholeness, moral rectitude and good citizenship.”¹⁵

Deaf persons were doubly damned, unable to gain access not only to the moral content of proper rhetorical education but also to the right “style” of speaking. “Eloquence,” offered Augustine, was really a matter of imitation, and thus achieved principally by “reading and hearing the eloquent,” by “reading and listening to the orations of orators, and, in as far as it is possible, by imitating them.”¹⁶ More particularly, a deaf student entering upon a rhetorical education, pursuing the path of the vir bonus,
could barely be expected to master the nuances of correct pronunciation, to produce the right tones and the “exactest expressions, nicely proportioned to the degrees of his inward emotions,” that Thomas Sheridan, the “champion of the elocution movement in the eighteenth century,” claimed was a “necessity of [the] social state to man both for the unfolding, and exerting of his nobler faculties.” 17 Thus the plight of deaf students hoping to receive a rhetorical education appears even more dire—how might they become good *speakers* when they have never heard words, let alone tones and pronunciations, themselves?

If we turn to Quintilian’s own definition of rhetoric, we see the potential of deafness to disrupt the ear and the order of rhetoric itself: rhetoric, he writes, “will be best divided, in my opinion, in such a manner that we may *speak* first of the *art*, next of the *artist*, and then of the *work*. The *art* will be that which ought to be attained by study, and is the *knowledge how to speak well*. The *artificer* is he who has thoroughly acquired the art, that is, the orator, whose business is to *speak well*. The *work* is what is achieved by the artificer, that is *good speaking*. 18 *Speaking*: Quintilian’s definition of rhetoric, intertwined as it is with a definition of education as well, quadruply repeats (stutters?) the central precept of speech.

By the Enlightenment, when literacy and education became more widespread, this precept sometimes fell on deaf ears. Literally. As Davis tell us, “before the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, the deaf were not constructed as a group”; furthermore, when the attention of philosophers and educators during the Enlightenment did turn to deafness, “one might conclude that deafness itself was not so much the central phenomenon as was education.” 19 Thus, it was through and in education that deafness began to be known as a group trait, as a sociocultural category rather than as an individual difference—as it seems to have been referenced in writing about deafness before this point, in the Old and New Testaments and in works by Aristotle, Descartes, and others.

Looking back at my partial history of deaf education, we can see that the birth of deaf schools—or rather the separation of deaf persons from any educational “mainstream” by placing them primarily in deaf “institutions” or “asylums,” as they were often called—began both in Europe and then a little later, here in North America, during the Enlightenment. The management of deaf lives—particularly through their education and their language—has been tied up in the legacy of Quintilian’s “good man speaking well” who lies at the heart of our humanistic tradition. He [*sic*] who does not speak well must be trained, maintained, contained, restrained. In
training the deaf person (who was long designated as “deaf-mute”), deaf education is part of the entire aggressive humanistic tradition of (rhetorical) education that Lanham asserts we have carried forth from that initial “‘Q’ Question”: “humanism, construed in this rhetorical way, is above all an education in politics and management.”

For the most part, those political and educational moments of “management,” both at large and more specifically as they pertain to how best to educate a deaf student, are hammered on the mettle of literacy, mined from sources where literacy is seen as either language or communication. It is from the realm of literacy that deafness, following the multiple possibilities of my metaphor, might be mined as precious ore or explosive danger.