

INTERLUDE



Deaf Tutees

THE STORIES OF the various participants in this study are interspersed throughout the chapters. First I present the profiles of the deaf tutees. The rest will follow in the remaining chapters. For this study I took a cultural rather than a clinical view of deafness. For instance, I did not gather information about students' levels of hearing loss and residual hearing, as these are audist concepts that regard hearing as the norm and deafness as a deviation from that norm. This is a medical model of deafness. Instead, I took the cultural view that deaf people are neither deviant nor deficient and that it is unnecessary for them to become more like hearing people. Rather, they constitute a cultural and linguistic minority whose only disability is that our society is geared toward hearing people. However, one cannot simply assume that every deaf person uses ASL or is a member of the Deaf community. There are many ways to be deaf, and not all deaf people are culturally Deaf.

Rae

Rae³ was a tutee at Davis College at the time of the study. She is a twenty-five-year-old deaf white woman. Since her participation in the study,

3. The participants either chose their own pseudonyms or asked me to choose one for them. The more interesting and unique ones are those they chose.

Rae has left college, changed her career plans, and decided to become a stuntwoman or a wild animal trainer. Rae is a small woman who shops at the Whole Foods supermarket, reads *Organic Style*, and considers herself an environmentalist. She appeared to be popular among the college students and staff; the assistant director, Brock, recommended her as my first observation, I believe, because of her easygoing yet plucky personality.

Rae characterizes her language use as Pidgin Signed English (PSE). She explained to me that she had first learned to sign in English word order and was later exposed to ASL at the state⁴ school for the deaf (SSD), which she attended from 1992 to 1996. Her signing now incorporates elements of ASL and English, which is called *contact signing* (and is also referred to as PSE). Attendance at a residential school is an important factor in Deaf acculturation (Lane, Hoffmeister, and Bahan 1996). Rae enrolled at Davis as a film student and first came to the writing center to get help with her learning disability.

In the 2003 spring semester, Rae had a standing, weekly two-hour appointment with John, her tutor. They began working on her film-class assignments, but after she dropped that class, most of their tutoring focused on her Spanish history class. Rae and John made a good match for the effectiveness of the tutorial. Rae knew what she needed and told John what she wanted to work on in the sessions. In the first tutorial I observed, she said the following to John:

So, what I'd like you to do is just to check out my paper, just to, you know, edit it, make sure it makes sense. I'm not totally finished with it. I do have a lot more to go, but I'd like to get your feedback about what I should do next, what more information I should add to it.⁵

In a way, Rae was the ideal tutee as she took charge of the session and was able to articulate her goals.

4. I withhold the name of the state for confidentiality reasons.

5. All of the deaf people's words are as voiced by an interpreter. Therefore, the reader should pay attention to general sense and meaning rather than particulars of grammar and word choice. Some of the material has been edited for readability.

In the past, Rae had been tutored by an expert in ASL, and she appreciated that. She had also been tutored by an instructor at the college who asked inappropriate questions and wasted her time. Rae felt comfortable giving feedback to the assistant director of the writing center about what kind of tutor she did or did not want. One of her other preferences was directness: “I guess in Deaf culture people are rather direct as opposed to someone going on and on without getting to the point of what they’re trying to say.”

Rae knew what she wanted to work on, and she told the tutor about it. She was not the type of passive tutee that many tutors complain about. This part of her personality made her a model tutee. Also, John said she was interested, and he liked that. The Davis College Tutoring in Writing Skills Responsibilities Form states that the writer’s role is to “bring in writing and/or have some idea about which aspect of writing you want to work on in each session.” Rae clearly did this. She also met the other requirements of her role, which were to “ask questions, draw on the consultant’s experience and knowledge, make suggestions, act on suggestions, and take a sincere interest in your writing and in improving your writing.” She clearly wanted to work with her tutors, and she gave the following advice for tutors who would be working with deaf people: “Help them out. Show them what makes sense and what doesn’t make sense. And if the deaf student asks why, then be patient with your answer. Answer the question and be clear. Most important is really to be patient with the deaf student because English is not often their first language.”

Blue

At the time of the study, Blue was a nineteen-year-old acting major and a tutee in the writing center at Davis College. She is a young black woman who is interested in dancing; I confirmed this with her after reading a paper she wrote about a dance she created with her family for her grandmother’s birthday party. I also noted the presentation she did about Janet Jackson, who interested her as a dancer. Blue is very

motivated to learn and enjoys the time she spends with her tutor. In an interview she said this:

Well, honestly, I feel pretty motivated to learn how to write. I feel like I'm ready to do it. You know, I feel more like I want to learn about verbs and adjectives. I feel pretty inspired to get that information and to learn about it.

In addition, she said she would like to improve her reading and English vocabulary. During the course of the study she was singled out as the most improved tutee, an honor that carried a cash award. She was nominated by her tutor, Newby, who also won a cash award for submitting her name.

Like Rae, Blue attended the SSD. She graduated from City Vocational Career Academy (CVCA).⁶ At SSD she was exposed to ASL, but she reported that deaf students at CVCA signed differently. She reported that at SSD “there was more expressiveness, more joking capability, more social humor. But it seems there wasn't really much of that going on in the language [at CVCA].” She prefers that other people use ASL, but she is not really sure whether she prefers English or ASL in an academic context. Her interpreter, Jay, says that she tends to transliterate (interpret word for word from spoken to signed English) with Blue in the tutoring session.

The first semester I met Blue she was taking Intro to College Writing, and the second semester she was taking English Composition I. In the tutorial she also discussed work for her science class. She felt that her writing had improved greatly as a result of coming to the tutorials. The main issue she wanted to work on in the tutoring sessions was grammar, and through the tutoring sessions she was able to learn how to correct her own errors. She said the idea that grammar was important came from her teachers. She also wanted to work on understanding her homework assignments. Although she appreciated having an interpreter present during the tutoring sessions, she did not mind conducting the conferences in writing without an interpreter.

6. Name of the city withheld for confidentiality reasons.

When I asked Blue why she chose Davis instead of Gallaudet (the only liberal arts college exclusively for deaf students), she replied that she preferred to live at home rather than in a dorm. Also, at SSD she had not liked the food, and I think she generalized her opinion to include all residence halls. She currently lives with her mother, her mother's boyfriend, and her siblings. One of her brothers is also deaf, and her mother works for a shipping company. Blue said she would like to move into her own apartment. She was looking for a job the summer I met her but had not found one by the following fall, when our observations were complete.

Kali

Kali is a twenty-two-year-old Hispanic deaf woman. Her dad is deaf, and her mother, now deceased, was hard of hearing. She has one brother and two sisters, and one of whom is hard of hearing. Kali is originally from Texas, and her grandparents were from Mexico. Her paternal grandparents speak Spanish, her maternal grandmother spoke English, and her paternal grandfather spoke English and Spanish. In my research I learned that most deaf parents of deaf children use ASL at home with their children and that deaf and hearing children of deaf parents grow up using ASL as a first language. In Kali's case, her parents used a mix of ASL and English-like signing at home. Since Kali's mother and sister were hard of hearing, this makes sense, as many hard of hearing people use signs in English word order. Kali reported her parents would also use English-like signing with her hearing siblings. Avid readers, her parents ordered adult-level magazines such as *National Geographic*, *Time*, and *Life* for their children to read. As a deaf child of deaf parents, Kali is different from many deaf students in that she has a firm basis in language that allows her to read at an appropriate level (Mayer 2007). She prefers English-type signing, frequently fingerspells, and prefers interpreters who transliterate word for word so she can get the exact English that the tutor or teacher is using. As she told me in an interview,

I have been a bookworm since I was little. So I really loved reading a lot. But writing was not my strength. Recently I became used

to—I'm learning my skill in writing. And so I'm trying to push myself to write more, more than I have before.

In college, Kali is developing an interest in writing.

Kali attended various schools and often missed classes since her dad moved around because of his work as a roofer. She attended both deaf and mainstream programs at Catholic schools, and for a brief time she attended the Model Secondary School for the Deaf at Gallaudet University. Because of her financial situation she decided not to go to Gallaudet University. Actually, Kali ended up dropping out of high school altogether when her mother got sick. After her mother died, Kali enrolled in the GED program at Stanhope College. Her success and enjoyment in that program influenced her to continue at Stanhope for her college basics. She is currently living with her sister while she completes her general education requirements and prepares to transfer to a four-year institution. She is considering California State University at Northridge and Northern Illinois University, both of which have well-regarded programs for deaf students. For her major she is thinking of business, pharmacy, or education.

Kali was attending tutoring for the second semester of the freshman sequence, Rhetoric 102, which focuses on writing about literature. In the fall semester she took the first course in the sequence. In an interview, Kali discussed her attitude about writing:

I wanna write, I wanna write well. I know before I came here to the school I never wrote. I didn't write much at all. And I didn't . . . I did read a lot, but I didn't write a lot. So I didn't have confidence in my writing ability. But now this is my first year experiencing writing and doing essays, everything. So, I wrote an essay in high school, but it was nothing like what I'm doing here. Still, I withdrew from school, and I missed out on so much. And everything in the English course. And that's why I didn't have a lot of experience until I came here to Stanhope College. And so I've had good experiences and challenges, and it's exciting, too. I really love it. I love to write. Before, I didn't have any idea how to write or have anybody to help me with this. And now with the tutoring, it's helped me so much. So, it's

been good. I hope that I can continue to write more 'cause I really love writing. And I learn how to be more confident in the writing. Before, I didn't like to show people my writing because I only knew one way. I know that the only way I really can improve my writing is to show people my writing and get different points of view. And to change some of my writing and work on my weak areas.

Gustav, her tutor, said that she was a special tutee because of her talent and her attitude. Like Rae, she is especially motivated and takes control of her own learning. For instance, she makes it a point to tell the interpreter or tutor what she needs, and if it's not working out, she asks to work with someone else. She valued learning about writing in the tutoring sessions, and she was interested in more than just grammar. In fact, she valued learning about research, paragraphing, development, essay structure, and focus. She also appreciated the clear, specific feedback she got in the writing center.