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Abstract

In this essay, I draw upon Deaf culture and the concept of Deaf Gain to illustrate how the hearing classroom could benefit from practices that engage in embodied discourses and visual-spatial metaphors. This essay also activates student-centered pedagogy in a way that builds off of Deaf culture, so that students, rather than acting as empty audience members in the theater of learning, become the expressive performers on the stage and the human technologies in motion, embodying a range of identity markers and cultural expressions. Drawing upon the rich body of nonverbal communication that complements the complex linguistic components of American Sign Language (ASL) that comprise Deaf culture, I propose that we engage the physical space of the classroom as well as the expressive space of an embodied pedagogical practice.

Introduction

When university professors teach face-to-face in the classroom, they have access to instantaneous feedback from their students. Access to student feedback, however, is not the same as actual student feedback. In a worst-case scenario, these professors stare out at a blank sea of faces asking again and again, “Are there any questions?” Although feedback in the face-to-face classroom can come from students in a wide array of oral and visual forms, including spoken words, raised hands, arched eyebrows, slumped shoulders, and crossed arms, for the most part, able-bodied students have learned throughout their formal education to project a perfect blank stare. Consequently, educators have increasingly turned to technology, such as Clickers and Twitter backchannels, to engage more deeply with their students’ learning. Nevertheless, these technologies are limited by linguistic expression, digital access, and data collection. Technology is valuable, but, as suggested by the dystopian narratives of immobilized bodies captured in E.M. Forster’s short story “The Machine Stops” (1909) or in the Disney Pixar animated film Wall-E (2008), technology is capable of tempting people to exchange their existing human capabilities for assistive devices and de-contextualized simulations. In this essay, I draw upon Deaf culture and the concept of Deaf Gain to illustrate how the hearing classroom could benefit from practices that engage in embodied discourses and visual-spatial metaphors.

This essay also activates student-centered pedagogy in a way that builds off of Deaf culture, so that students, rather than acting as empty audience members in the theater of learning, become the expressive performers on the stage and the human technologies in motion, embodying a range of identity markers and cultural expressions.

The human body communicates far beyond words, yet its expressive art and multisensory experiences are being abandoned for the seemingly better technologies of language-driven social media and online learning. Along these lines, Lennard J. Davis (1995) argues that “disability is not a minor issue that relates to a relatively small number of unfortunate people; it is part of a historically constructed discourse, an ideology of thinking about the body under certain historical circumstances. Disability is not an object—a woman with a cane—but a social process that intimately involves everyone who has a body and lives in the world of the senses.” (2). The technologies that we gain in response to the various needs of people with hearing loss are not limited only to the devices we create to normalize deaf persons as hearing persons, through hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other assistive devices and communication technologies. Rather, developments in Deaf Studies over the past five to ten years have shown that “the highly visual, spatial, and kinetic structures of thought and language” that comprise Deaf culture may transform “hearing ways of knowing” (Baumann and Murray 2013, 246).

This approach is referred to as Deaf Gain: instead of viewing deafness as the “loss of hearing,” H-Dirksen L. Baumann and Joseph J. Murray (2014) have proposed the idea that deafness is something that is gained, and that hearing culture has much to benefit from the “unique cognitive, creative, and cultural gains manifested through deaf ways of being in the world” (xv). Specifically, I’m interested in how Deaf Gain plays a role in education, literature, and digital technology. Drawing upon the rich body of nonverbal communication that complements the complex linguistic components of American Sign Language that comprise Deaf culture, I propose that we engage the physical space of the classroom as well as the expressive space of an embodied pedagogical practice.

As a Coda, or Child of Deaf Adults—raised by two deaf parents alongside five hearing siblings—I learned to encode and decode facial expressions, body language, and the more complex vocabulary and grammar of American Sign Language as essential components of my human development in language, communication, and knowledge in the world. As a child, I was deeply impacted by Deaf culture and Deaf ways of knowing, and dwelled more frequently on the Deaf side of the borderland between Deaf/Hearing worlds.[2] Yet, my formal education in English studies had de-emphasized the body as a vehicle for communication, locating knowledge primarily in oral and aural articulations. Consequently, reading aloud in class often meant physically following along with the words on the page, listening to the mechanics of each student’s voice as they performed the sounds of words, my heart palpitating and my tongue growing pasty as I anticipated my own turn and my own performance of hearing culture.[3] Listening and reading comprehension were divorced from the act of reading out loud, and thus when my English teacher turned to me with a question, not only did I have no idea what we had just read, but I had no idea what question he was asking. I responded with a shy shrug of the shoulders and silent pleading eyes. Like so many other students, reading comprehension was difficult for me because there was a gulf between the words on the page and the ideas they symbolize.

Despite (and perhaps because of) my early struggles in reading and comprehension classes, decades later I would become an English professor myself. As a child who was more comfortable with the visual expression of ideas, poetry became an instant lifeline for me to communicate my thoughts, feelings, and ideas within hearing culture. Poetry, like American Sign Language, engages with visual and imaginative pulses of expression, with narrative and storytelling following cinematic gestures through time that can be cut and edited.[4] When I enrolled in creative writing classes in high school, for the first time I was able to understand how the English language works, and how I could use words to capture partial snapshots of the complexity of human experience and knowledge. Baumann and Murray (2014) have commented on Allen Ginsberg’s response to seeing the phrase “hydrogen jukebox” from his poem “Howl” translated into sign language, noting that Ginsberg was “astonished at the precise, concrete, and creative imagery that resulted from a jukebox revved up to the point of a mushroom-cloud explosion of a hydrogen bomb. He felt that sign-language poetry does what he and his fellow poets have been trying to do—create clear images” (xxx). Instead of viewing sign language as an extension or expression of poetry, I would like to consider sign language—and its associated nonverbal, gestural, and imagined interfaces—as a vehicle for education in diverse learning environments. I am engaging the concept of “universal design in writing pedagogy,” which points to methods in introducing “a variety of visual, aural, spatial, and kinesthetic approaches to tap into the intellectual chaos that goes into writing in the physical literal sense” to show the connection between the inner eye of the signer and the inner eye of the poet (Dunn and Dunn De Mers 2002). In the sections that follow, I explore how understanding the gestural and nonverbal technologies of Deaf culture and languages can
Influence the public education of hearing, neurodiverse, and differently abled students.

Classroom Observation Through Deaf Eyes

In spring 2011, my parents came to observe my teaching as an English Professor for the first time, and it was then that I saw my classroom through Deaf eyes. For eight years, before my parents observed my classroom, I had taught mostly traditional English classes, and rarely did I reflect on disability or gestural forms of communication in my classroom. When I became a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology, I began developing pedagogies that emphasized multimodal approaches to writing and communication, and so my classroom was already in the process of transforming. [5] Despite the inherent multimodal nature of the program, when my parents expressed interest in seeing my place of work, all I could imagine was the blank tableau of my classroom—so many lips moving and ears imperceptibly listening. I knew that no matter how animated and interactive my classroom might be according to hearing standards, no matter how expressive I would be with my face and my gestures, and no matter how brilliant my slide show presentation, my parents would be bored and disconnected from the content and activity of the course.

In anticipation of my parents’ visit, I asked my students to focus on nonverbal modes of communication to deliver their group presentations in what I believed would be a deaf-friendly format. Their presentations served as experimental drafts of their larger group project, which was a creative storytelling project that remediated Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Lady Audley’s Secret (1861) in terms of contemporary issues surrounding privacy in digital contexts. I sat with my parents in the back of the classroom and proudly watched as students variously put together fully captioned slide shows, performed mini action sequences, and even learned a few words in sign language. I was impressed with what my Georgia Tech students were willing to do and learn in order to perform well in the classroom. To further involve my parents, I asked them to vote on the best nonverbal presentation, and to my surprise, my dad was unimpressed, and couldn’t decide which one was best—in his eyes, they were all equally blank.

Instead of me impressing my parents with my curriculum, my parents gave me a lesson in what nonverbal communication means—a phrase I threw around lightly when I was giving my students instructions. It does not include signed English, it does not include captions on a screen, and it does not include visual aids. Rather, it is the story we tell with our bodies. Studies in nonverbal communication are mostly grounded in hearing culture, with emphasis on gestures as extensions of gender, power, professional identity, politics, and evolutionary theories. The nonverbal is typically posed as an extension of hearing culture rather than a fundamental expression of an embodied human experience, capable of infinite articulation. Nonverbal communication is the story we tell with our bodies. In ASL storytelling, “non-manual signals, such as facial expression, provide important information . . . By changing [the] body position so that each character faces a different direction, [the performer] help[s] the audience understand which character is doing the action” (qtd in Peters 2000, 83). ASL is a visual language, and adept Deaf storytellers engage in art forms that build upon the everyday gestural communication of deaf persons. Baumann and Murray (2014) note that “the traditions of mime and silent theater could be pushed to new levels through the hands and bodies of individuals who spend their lives communicating in a gestural medium” (xxx). My dad, in addition to serving as the Director of the State of Michigan’s Division on Deafness for over 30 years, has also performed as an ASL storyteller, humorist, and mime. Described in the Chicago Tribune as “a gifted teller of jokes and stories, a punster, [and] a delight” (Rubin 1988), my dad, who preferred the animated comedy of Red Skelton to the spoken humor of Bob Hope, extended his love of animated humor and storytelling into mime. When I was a kid, my dad used to perform mimes with his “magic hats” trunk during public assemblies at my elementary school. He’d put on his plastic fire engine red hat and act out a dramatic scene of the bungling firefighter racing to the rescue, getting tangled in the fire hose, struggling to put the ladder up, until the end, when he climbs up the ladder and showcases the emergency; he has rescued a tiny kitten out of the tree. While he was a deaf man performing for a hearing audience of children, his hearing loss was rendered less visible when he narrated a story with everyday gestures, expressions, and body movements. At the same time, his performance made visible the storytelling ability of the human body, and it demanded that the children decode his stories through careful watching.

Prompted by my dad’s disappointment in my Georgia Tech students, I invited him up to the front of the classroom to perform one of his own skits in mime. He decided to perform the one called, “The Teacher.” “The Teacher” tells the story of a dim-witted professor leading a boring class, droning on and on about the textbook, turning around to scratch words from the textbook on the chalkboard. Every time the teacher turns his back to the class, he gets hit with a spitball. Of course, the grumpy old teacher gets mad and threatens the students with the archaic punishment of a ruler if they keep it up. Finally, he spins around just in time to catch the culprits in the act, while also throwing a spitball right in the face. But however, he’s caught the student in the act and is delighted he gets to punish the student. But, to his surprise, the student stands up to a height of 8 feet. The teacher becomes speechless, frightened, and cowardly. Apologizing profusely, he hands the ruler to the student. The skit ends with the teacher turning around, bending over, and awaiting punishment.

The skit itself is a parody of the hearing classroom, in which the teacher delivers an oral/aural lecture, while the students express their dissatisfaction through physical mini-aggressions with their spitballs. Students don’t throw spitballs anymore, and teachers don’t use rulers. Instead, we have distracted students staring at their mobile devices and teachers who sneer and give point deductions to students looking at their personal screens. But why shouldn’t the student “play” on Facebook or “play” with spitballs? If it happens when we ask students to put away their screens, we are ignoring the embodied interface of the classroom and the multisensory affordances of shared space.

In the years after my parents’ visit, I have begun to incorporate the “Nonverbal Skit” as an integral pedagogical practice. I introduce, assign, and complete the activity within the time of one class period to reduce the stakes of the assignment and induce spontaneity. In a 50-minute class session, I briefly introduce students to a vocabulary of nonverbal gestures, which I do by performing a skit myself, a version of “The Teacher.” Students work in groups to compose their short skits based on my mini-directions, which are usually connected to larger course themes. As students present their skits to the class, I also ask students to comment on well-played gestures or to replay a concept with different gestures. Most importantly, we wrap up the session with reflections on the visual and spatial affordances of expressing concepts with our bodies.

While the nonverbal skits students perform are themselves valuable journeys into exploring spatial and gestural codes, it is what happens immediately after the skits that surprises me. After spending 20 minutes encoding nonverbal skits with their bodies and decoding nonverbal skits with their eyes, a tiny radical transformation has occurred. I walk to the front of the classroom and see them all sitting with their laptops open, as usual, but they’re not looking at the laptop screen, they’re not looking into their laps at their smartphone, and they’re not looking off into space. Instead, all of their eyes are on me. The stares make me slightly uncomfortable, because they make me aware that my nonverbal performance is different from theirs, informed as it is by Deaf culture. However, I have invited the stares and have made them a part of the pedagogical practice.[6] Through this practice, the attention of their eyes has been recaptured and retrained to look at me rather than just listen to me. Their eyes respond to me as an embodied classroom interface, and I cannot be replaced by a screen.

Cathy Davidson, at her 2012 keynote for the Harvard Initiative for Learning and Teaching (HILT), provoked her audience with the statement that “If we [professors] can be replaced by a computer screen, we should be.” She followed up on this claim in her Fast Company op-ed piece “Can We Replace Professors with Computer Screens?” (2012), emphasizing that “every workplace survey says communication skills, critical thinking ability, collaborative skills, and ability to understand diverse cultural contexts and acuity at diagnosing problems and finding creative solutions are the most prized qualities in future employees,” and that these skills are developed in the everyday interactions on residential campuses.[7] In Davidson’s discussion of the future workplace in Now You See It, she focuses on the changing needs of the 21st century concept of work—which is no longer a place, but rather a way of thinking. Consequently, the informal free time we spend with colleagues (or classmates) is lost. Likewise, the classroom is no longer a single place, but rather an interface that is shaped by the bodies of the students in that classroom. Davidson (2012) also points to Hamilton’s belief that “playfulness is part of creative, innovative, collaborative, productive work.” He creates a space in Second Life for his colleagues to informally and playfully interact with one another. If play is so valuable, why do we leave it to chance? Why do we leave it up to students and workers to decide what constitutes play in a face-to-face setting? With nonverbal skits, students are playing together in a planned interface.

We communicate relationships of power, aggression, insult, and fear via nonverbal gestures. When I replicated my dad’s performance of “The Teacher” in my own classroom, a glaring gender-power issue emerged. While my dad could humorously perform the act of being overpowering by a student in his classroom, topped off with the act of bending over and getting spanked with a paddle, my identity as a young female professor becomes compromised in the act of performing this sequence.

Embodiment narrates an act of critical reading. For an assignment on visual rhetoric, a student once presented me with Alfred Eisenstaedt’s famous photograph V J Day in Times Square, which features a passionate kiss between an American sailor and a civilian woman, taken in Times Square of New York City on August 14, 1945. The student pointed out the romance depicted in the setting, the embrace, the onlookers, the contrast. The student saw what others had seen for decades, but what he and others couldn’t see were the gestures. So we put ourselves in the position of the woman: her face squished, her arm limp—not in a passion, but
In digital studies, we explore this complexity of human experience through short readings in modernist literature, including an excerpt from the beginning of Virginia Woolf’s Mrs. Dalloway (1925). Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf tunnels into the minds of characters, beyond the physical moment to their memories of deaths. In the opening passages in which Mrs. Dalloway is thrown back upon her memories of a past lover when she feels the air in her lungs. In the following passage Septimus Warren Smith feels intricately connected with the trees and sparrows, and in the private space of his mind, he feels like he is teetering on the point of madness, and he feels this connection in his body:

“But they beckoned; leaves were alive; trees were alive. And the leaves being connected by millions of fibres with his own body, there on the seat, fanned it up and down; when the branch stretched he, too, made that statement. The sparrows fluttering, rising, and falling in jagged fountains were part of the pattern; the white, blue, barred with black branches. Sounds made harmonies with premeditation; the spaces between them were as significant as the sounds.” (Woolf 1925, 22)

Septimus observes that “the spaces between them [the harmonies] were as significant as the sounds.” In embodied digital studies, we endeavor to make similar observations about the spaces between the 1s and 0s, following in the steps of Douglas Rushkoff (2013): “There’s nothing in between that 1 and 0, since a computer or switch is either on or off. All the messy stuff in between yes and no, on and off, just doesn’t travel down wires, through chips, or in packets. For something to be digital, it has to be expressed in digits” (50). But we can choose to live in between the 1s and 0s—we can choose to live a life that is not programmed.

When we study data in this class, we consider the value of surface data, big data, and metadata, and we put that information in conversation with deep data. [11] In addition to using literature to illustrate deep data, I also immerse students in the complexity of human experience. While data projects like oneSecond collect, catalog, and present one second of posts on Twitter into 4500 pages across four books, the magnitude of human experience concentrated in one second, in class, we focus on a tweet. We note, for example, that the content that students post on social media does not, as Manovich (2012) notes, constitute “transparent windows into their selves; instead, they are usually carefully curated and systematically managed” (465). Instead, we focus on the texture of human lives, from what we see, hear, and feel to what we imagine, remember, and predict. Stephen Kusuiisto (2008) offers a similar approach in his essay “Teaching by Ear,” where he
uses his blindness to teach students to deepen their listening skills: "What I’m after in the classroom is to help students see that the imagination is really not so different from listening in the dark. And that the more carefully we listen, the more we sense there is, or was always there" (127). By teaching students to access the multiple textures of human experience, they learn to see, hear, or feel more deeply than they could before. Embodied digital studies moves in concert with disability studies, valuing sensory experiences of the world, while acknowledging the immeasurable variations in sensory experiences from person to person.

Conclusion
In an era of decreased state funding and increased reliance on enrollment-based funding, universities are investing more and more in technologies that enable professors to deliver courses in bulk. Research in Deaf Gain related to higher education, including studies in architectural spaces, community living, cinematic lenses, poetics, digital advances, and cognition promises to be one of the most valuable investments we can make in improving residential campuses and face-to-face pedagogy. When we transform our pedagogical practices in the face-to-face classroom to value the deep learning that comes with human interaction and embodiment—particularly when those bodies vary in identity markers of class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and disability—our students gain ethical knowledge that values human difference.

Acknowledgments
I want to especially thank my parents Christopher and Annella Hunter for providing me with a warm and rich experience of Deaf culture and for prompting me to think critically about the embodied classroom. I’d also like to thank Kathi Inman Berens, Paul Fyfe, and George H. Williams for their various contributions to the initial growth and development of the ideas expressed in this article. Finally, I want to thank Andrew Lucchesi, Sushil Oswal, and the reviewers for their valuable roles in the production of this special issue.

Bibliography

Notes
[1] I adhere to the convention of using capital D: Deaf to refer to the community of people engaged in shared language and cultural practices and using lowercase d: deaf to refer to hearing loss and people with hearing loss who may or may not identify with the Deaf community.
[3] Research on deaf children’s reading comprehension and visual spatial attention suggests that “deaf individuals are more distracted by visual information in the parafovea and periphery” (Dye, Hauser, and Bavelier 2008, 71).
[4] Baumann (2005) writes at length on the connections between cinematic techniques and ASL: “[g]iven such a complex, homogenous relationship between techniques used in ASL and film, one wonders why the lexicon of film techniques is not a standard part of ASL poetics” (109).
[5] One of the guiding principles of the Writing and Communication Program at Georgia Tech is WOVEN, which stands for written, oral, visual, electronic, and nonverbal forms of communication.
[7] I discuss ways that multimodal classrooms can prepare students for the 21st-century workplace through social learning projects in “Learning to Adapt: Students, Teachers, and Professionals in the 21st Century” as part of a co-authored article on “Composition at Washington State University: Building a Multimodal Bricolage” (forthcoming 2016).
[8] On September 30, 2012, the anonymous feminist blogger named Leopard writes about the photograph in “The Kissing Sailor, or The Selective Blindness of Rape Culture.”
[9] Sign languages “are rich in what Taub (2001) calls ‘metaphoric iconicity,’ in which complex ideas are demonstrated through visual-spatial metaphors. Such a language does not lack in abstraction, but gains in clarity of the concrete representation of complex ideas” (Baumann and Murray 2013, 249).
[10] In “Digital Pedagogy Unplugged,” Paul Fyfe writes: “Can we imagine ‘teaching naked’ as more than merely doing without, but as something already integrated to the circuit of its electronic counterpart? What if instead we kept the ‘digital’ in the non-electronic senses of that word: something to get your hands on, to deal with in dynamic units, to manipulate creatively?"
[11] Lev Manovich (2012) describes the difference between surface data and deep data: “In the twentieth century, the study of the social and the cultural relied on two types of data: “surface data” about lots of people and “deep data” about the few individuals or small groups. The first approach was used in all disciplines that adapted
quantitative methods ... The second approach was used in humanities fields such as literary studies, art history, film studies, and history” (461-62).

About the Author
Leeann Hunter is Clinical Assistant Professor of English and Digital Technology and Culture at Washington State University. She received her PhD in 2010 from the University of Florida, and she was a Marion L. Brittain Postdoctoral Fellow at the Georgia Institute of Technology from 2010-2012. Her research focuses on gender studies, professional culture, and social connectedness in Victorian literature and the digital humanities.

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Andrew Vetsch
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Reply

Ryan Roche
April 11, 2017 @ 12:28 pm
Noting that effective visual techniques are as much about the instructor's gestures and expressions as they are about filling slides with words, is an important distinction. Effective communication from professor to student not only enhances the transfer of information but also maintains focus and interest.

Reply

Julieann Guill
June 17, 2016 @ 12:35 am
Invaluable suggestions . Apropos , others are searching for a WI GF-129 , my business partner encountered a blank document here [http://goo.gl/JDP0kK]

Reply

CTW Response: ENGL 4320 – Danielle Reed
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[...] Hunter’s essay, “The Embodied Classroom: Deaf Gain in Multimodal Composition and Digital Studies,” describes her experiences as a Child of Deaf Adults and how those experiences shaped the way she [...] 
Reply

Analytics: Top 25 Pages for the Week of December 13 | CUNY Academic Commons News
January 22, 2016 @ 12:18 am
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Brenda
December 19, 2015 @ 10:24 pm
Leaann!! This was such a powerful and original article. I intend to now share it with my graduate seminar “Teaching College Composition” when I teach it again (every Fall semester). This is the course that trains all the new Graduate Teaching Assistants at my university to teach the first and second-level required writing courses.
I also just truly enjoyed your narrative style (in addition to your argument and content). Lovely!

Brenda Brueggemann, Professor
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Research studies report at least three positive impacts of transmediating a print-based text into digital multimodal text on students’ learning: deeper understandings of content, creative expressions of ideas, and promoted analytic conversations. 1. Deeper Understandings of Content. Transmediation develops students’ understandings of specific literary and informational text. There are some evidence-based tasks for transmediation using digital multimodal composition. The table presents exemplary tasks using literary texts at three different levels. Elementary School (Grades K-5).