



**SSH: The Podcast**  
**Episode 6: Deaf Aesthetics in Education Design**

Host: Hello and welcome to SSH: The Podcast. Or as we like to say, SSSSSH: The Podcast, showcasing the diversity of research and creative activities in the University of Alberta's College of Social Sciences and Humanities. Recorded at the Sound Studies Institute, we come to you from Treaty 6 territory, the traditional lands of First Nations and Métis peoples.

I am your host, Joanna Harrington, and with me for this episode is Professor Joanne Weber, who holds a Tier II Canada Research Chair in Deaf Education.

Welcome Professor Weber to SSSSSH: The Podcast.

JW: Thank you. I'm delighted to be here.

Host: So perhaps I'll start by just asking you to discuss the role of design and deaf aesthetics in deaf education.

JW: Well I think probably the best way to understand it is to go back a little ways into my teaching experience working with deaf children and deaf youth. I'm deaf myself, but I was raised orally, and I was raised in the mainstream program. I did not have access to interpreters and I had no access to the deaf community at that time. However, when I started teaching, I realized very very quickly that when working with deaf children there was a way to present information visually. I started to experiment with that and I started to rip apart the standard curriculum because the order in which things were placed, in terms of presentation and style, had to be revamped. The more I became fluent in sign language, the more I realized that sign language discourses are arranged differently than spoken language discourses.

And so because of that, I would very often look at the classrooms in which the students were placed, and I would look at the work of other teachers of the deaf, and I remember thinking at that time, "Oh that's so hearing." "That is so hearing." And what I mean by that, is it is so audiocentric. And it wasn't that they were doing that deliberately, even I was doing those same things. But the more I became familiar with the idea that things had to be presented visually, in a certain way to really maximize the learning potential of the students, I started thinking, "What is this?" So I hired an artist who happened to be hearing and we collaborated on visual storytelling design. The artist had developed a series of Powerpoint presentations for a university audience, and she adapted them for a high school audience. But she said it was more than that ... "Because when you told me about the structure of ASL, I had to completely flip the way the concepts were presented and actually do it backwards. And because of that, I've learned a new way of design."

From that point, I realized that design needs to be at the forefront of education. And the more I did research in my PhD studies about multimodalism, multimodal design and multimodal literacy, I realized design is what teachers need to develop in terms of a skillset. Because what we have now, is more understanding of what it means to have visual design for audiocentric people. And what I mean by that, is they rely on hearing to process everything and to access the world, and so their concept of what is visual, is very different from the concept of what is visual for people who rely on seeing the most. And so that's where my studies have taken me. And I'm calling this field deaf aesthetics because it's in terms of ... "That!" "A-ha!" "I know what this is." "This is meaningful." "This is clicking with me, in terms of how I process this information."

Host: So it sounds like you were at the forefront of essentially a new field, an emerging field of deaf aesthetics?

JW: Yes. It is related to a new research paradigm. We have about three other research paradigms that are dominant in our way of thinking about deaf people. But the most recent one is called the biosocial paradigm. And what that means is that it takes into consideration how the body is deaf – the idea of a deaf body – and also disabled people with other disabilities. So it is the idea that our world is shaped according to the way our bodies function. The way our minds function, the way the bodies function - so then it becomes an area of neuroaesthetics - the impact of art, and the arts on the brain. It becomes more evident in phenomenology, really looking at "What is that person experiencing?" "What is really true and real." And it's also connected to studies related to how people connect with each other on the basis of their biology, in terms of their bodies and how they function, and in terms of community. We're talking about cultural aspects. It's not just about ways people co-construct behaviours, a lot of those behaviours come directly from the body as well.

Host: It's a fascinating area and I'm already getting a sense that you draw on different disciplines. Is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinarity, or maybe even transdisciplinarity, very much a part of your work?

JW: Yes it is, because I'm an artist, I'm a writer, I'm a poet. I do a lot of visual artwork as well, but I have also done a lot of theatre. So my first love is the humanities. And getting into education was, "Oh jeez, do I have to do this?" "Do I really want to be a teacher?" "Do I really want to work with deaf kids?" There was a real sense that that really narrowed my repertoire. Because a lot of the training that we give to teachers nowadays is very much based on a biomedical model, very much based on neoliberal ideas, and scientific and technological innovation. So it just kind of left me feeling cold. One thing that is very much impoverished in deaf education is the arts. We focus so much on language. We do a lot of linguistics research. We have done so much on linguistics research that we've developed the basis for an acceptance that deaf people do have a culture. That's the biocultural research paradigm. And it's kind of like ok, is it just linguistics? Is it just the study of culture? Is it just sociology? Well it's that too, but it's more than that. And that's where we get into the arts, which I'm trying to bring into deaf education. But it's also the understanding too, of how technology has really benefited us, as deaf people. And it's also a way of understanding the biological basis of our hearing loss. So, it

has to be multidisciplinary. And the other reason why it has to be this way is because when you're working with deaf people, you're always seeing the long range view. If I start working with a deaf child at the age of seven, I have to have a very good picture of how that child will grow and develop in multiple areas. You cannot just say well I taught them this verb this week and that's all I need to be concerned about. It's about looking at the whole person. And that means multiple disciplines.

Host: So does this connection with drama and drama education, do you find this helps your research make stronger connections beyond the academic community?

JW: Yes. Because I'm a language teacher too, the whole focus is to try to prevent language deprivation, or to reduce the impact of it. I have found that drama is probably the most effective way of working with a group of very language deprived people who have really struggled with acquiring language because they didn't get the exposure to it when they were young - they weren't given many opportunities to interact in the language. And so they have grown up quite restricted in many, many ways. But the drama sort of tapped into the native intelligence that is already there. Because one thing we do know about language, and language research, is that cognitive behaviours based on language are impaired through language deprivation. But when you use drama, you can see that that intelligence is still there, it's just trapped. It's just trapped because it's so dependent on language. But what the drama does is open up other avenues, other ways of expressing oneself. It frees the person up to be able to share what they know and understand, to develop relationships, to cooperate, and to develop understanding of metaphors, as an example. All of those things are possible. Those higher level cognitive functionings are there, and drama frees that up.

Host: I can tell a real love for the theatre arts coming through. Are there tips that you would give for teachers in general to learn from the research that you have done?

JW: Well I think one of the things that I've been thinking about is trying to give in-service teachers and pre-service teachers a sense of how deaf people process things visually. You don't necessarily have to know sign language to do that. It would help, but you don't have to know sign. That artist that came and worked with me, once I was able to explain to her how deaf people think, how the discourses are changed, she "saw it." Because she was an artist, she was very visual, but she was also very hearing. And so she had to really work hard to flip that around, so that it became part of widening her own visual repertoire - when she came to know that there was a different way to communicate through vision. I think that if we're able to teach that to teachers - to help them understand how deaf people would process that information, how aesthetic design would really impact students. It doesn't matter if the deaf students are signing or they are oral, they would capitalize on their vision. Part of one of my studies had to do with what the impact is on hearing students when information is presented this way. And there seems to be some indication - I'm trying to be modest here - there seems to be some indication that other populations have benefitted from this as well. And to have really tapped into some of the areas for neuro-divergence - for people who have ADHD, or people who may struggle with other types of learning challenges as well.

Host: Maybe that's a message for students interested in this area that taking a course in say deaf education actually opens you up, by the sounds of it, to more than just deaf education. Would that be a fair, fair comment to make?

JW: Actually I'm running my studies through EDPY 301 which is the study of inclusive education. I have about 120 students in that class and what I have been doing is giving them assignments on how to design something according to deaf aesthetics principles. They learn about deaf aesthetics and then I give them a challenge: "Now you're going to design something that will use deaf aesthetics principles, that will not just be used for an imaginary deaf person in the classroom maybe down the road, but also at the same time meet the needs of another person with a disability of a different kind, which could be like ADHD or could be a learning disability." And so that's a project-based learning activity that they have to do as part of the requirements for the class that I'm teaching.

Host: Could you give us an example where those of us who are hearing take an audiocentric approach?

JW: Well I'll give the example drawn from Universal Design [for Learning] where there's a diagram with a picture of a house. And then there are pillars. And on the pillars, there is writing that is presented sideways. Well how many of us can read sideways? But the assumption is that whoever's presenting this will be talking about the pillars, so there really isn't the need to read sideways. But for deaf people, what are they going to do? They can't hear the presenter. They have to follow an interpreter. And they have to read sideways. And so, I remember showing it to my deaf research assistant and she said "I don't like that; let's flip it on the side." And when she flipped the thing on the side, then you can read the pillar, but you also now have an image of a flag, which became something completely different. But it's interesting because it did not fit her perceptual processing needs. So she turned it on the side and then she found, she was happy, but it became an entirely different image. So that would be the example that I can think of. And I think that that's the place where people get bogged down, thinking "It is visual." "I have a picture in my Powerpoint." "I've lots of pictures in my Powerpoint. That's visual." Or, "I have movies in my Powerpoint so that's visual." But what I have found is that sometimes those pictures would be random, or they wouldn't relate to the text, or the Powerpoint would have just a massive amount of text, and then I have to be able to read plus watch an interpreter at the same time. Or maybe the slides will be spattered with about four or five different images, and they might not really be all connected. And one thing about our ASL discourse is you get to the point first and then you expand. When you look at a standard presentation by any other professor, they may start with a joke. Or they will start with some interesting tidbit that they learned. Or they will start with something else, and then they gradually warm up to the topic at hand. Where, with the deaf aesthetic, it's the point first; where does the eye go first. Because it's like a gestalt - you're looking at things through your eyes. So when you do, you take in the whole and then you pick out which is the most important feature. Where an audiocentric design is about one word after another. It's about the sequence, it's about building up to the point.

Where, with us, it's about "Where's the point? Where's the point?" So we organize things so that the point is made very clearly first and then we add the additional information.

Host: And lastly, I'd like to end with a question about future projects. Where do you see your research going, say in the next five years? What do you see as needing the focus of your attention?

JW: Oh boy. I will still be working on deaf aesthetics, the framework for that. Deaf aesthetics has different dimensions to it. There is one dimension, which is based on perception, and I have a large study going now that will continue for a couple years and is based on the idea of what we can do in terms of online learning. So, what do deaf people prefer to see on a screen? How does that fit in with the perception of audiocentric and ocularcentric processing of information? So that's something that I would like to continue. Another area is the play-building where I work with the students to develop drama integration, arts integration, into a number of different subject areas. Another part of my work has been with preschool deaf children, in a bilingual/bimodal preschool, again using story drama, and especially with preschoolers who are deaf, but also may have an additional disability that really does interfere with a lot of their learning processes. Another area that I hope to get at, at some point later, is to work with immigrant deaf because I have done so much work with immigrant deaf already. And we are having to deal with many, many immigrants who moved in from countries where maybe the schooling hasn't been consistent, or maybe they never picked up a sign language. Maybe they have not really been able to receive the education that they need. So that's another area that I would like to work in because the research is very limited.

Multilingual deaf education is another area that needs to open up as well. We're seeing so much diversity in the deaf population now. Before it used to be white deaf people that for the most part were deafened through the rubella epidemic, and that's how I became deaf. It was because in utero I became infected with German measles. And so we had a kind of a fairly normative population of white deaf people who were normal in every other way. But now that has shifted to deafness as being one of a symptom of a syndrome, a genetic syndrome, or where there's often additional disabilities involved too.

Host: It's just a fascinating area. I'm so glad that you were able to come on to our Shhh: The Podcast as we like to call it. And thank you also for your contributions to our College -- and to the humanities and social sciences. I'd also like to thank our podcast team of Nicolás Arnáez, Tom Merklinger, and Oliver Rossier. And a special thanks to Pam Brenneis for sign language interpretation. And a thanks to our listeners for tuning in and learning a little more about how deaf aesthetics design principles can shape pedagogy and curriculum for deaf and non-deaf students. We'll be back in a few weeks with another episode of SSH: The Podcast. Feel free to check out the website of the College of Social Sciences and Humanities for more on what we do here at the University of Alberta.

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