

Teaching Philosophy Statement

Sommar Chilton, Associate Teaching Professor, Communication Sciences and Disorders

When I walk into my classrooms and see the undergraduate students sitting in their seats, I see the challenge to open new doors for each of them by exposing them to a new language and a new culture. On day one in CSD 218: American Sign Language I, I stand at the front of the class and begin to sign. I sign an introduction to the course and myself. My voice is off and the students stare at me. I can see the nervousness begin to increase on their faces. Some of them begin to look around to see if others are feeling the same as they feel. Sometimes they begin to whisper to each other wondering if I am going to talk. The monologue goes on for about 2 minutes and concludes with me signing and asking if anyone understands. Looks of confusion and questioning are what I see on the students' faces. I break the silence and in spoken English make a deal with them. I tell them that, if they commit to doing everything that I need them to do, in sixteen weeks I will sign the monologue again, and they will be able to understand what is being presented. Sixteen weeks later, after introducing vocabulary and structures of American Sign Language, going through activities and quizzes, and working outside of class on log time and lab homework, I sign the monologue for a second time. The students watch my face and hands again and, this time, nod along in understanding-- eyes bright with comprehension. This result is why I so enjoy doing what I do. Although our learners and I have changed over the last 20 years of teaching, I find the best education happens in a shared environment of respect, opportunity for everyone, and commitment to success.

Opening new doors that are not the typical mainstream experiences is the challenge of CSD 269: Deaf Culture. The first assignment that students in both the resident course and World Campus course complete is watching a video that was produced by the Deaf Performance Artists Network. The video is a music video with Deaf signers translating the John Mayer song "Waiting on the World to Change" from English into American Sign Language, along with statements and headlines about deafness and Deaf Culture. The students are asked to reflect on the video and also on their thoughts about words such as deaf, sign language, education, and others. Many of the responses that come from this activity align themselves with typical misconceptions that many hearing people may have when they think about deafness in the context of a disability. All Deaf people use sign language. Deaf people want to be cured. Having a deaf child is a tragedy. Deaf people live in a silent world. All are examples of these misconceptions. During our time in CSD 269: Deaf Culture, we spend the semester examining deafness from the cultural perspective and not the disability or medical perspective. I encourage the students to not use the term hearing impaired but replace that with the preferred identity terminology of Deaf person. We look at history, family, language, education, technology, employment, and more. We work to respect the linguistic and cultural differences of Deaf people and learn to support the goals and choices that this unique group set for themselves. I encourage students to bring their experiences to the classroom as well as think about their future careers and how this information will impact them. When our semester comes to a close, we watch the Mayer video again. I present the same questions along with questions about what they have learned and how this will affect their future. The amazing answers that students develop show me that we are in good hands with this next generation. They want to know and see differences in people not as barriers but as opportunities for everyone.

Educating does not stop at the classroom walls. Development of learning materials, and programs presentations to organizations, departments, and groups, mentoring the next generation of educators, support of clubs and organizations that continue the ripple effect of shared knowledge are all of great value to me. I also recognize that I cannot successfully educate without being a learner myself. As I grow and evolve in my space and knowledge it allows me to better prepare others who will continue to forge a better more inclusive world. As I open my ears, eyes, mind and heart to others who share their experiences and knowledge, I encourage other learners to do the same. We cannot do better if we do not know better.