

COLUMNISTS

A New Controversial Approach to Literacy: SignWriting: Will It Work?

by Alexandra Han

A controversial way to read, write and type one's sign language, SignWriting (or SW) is an 'alphabet', or a list of symbols, that can be used to write one's sign language. Like the Roman alphabet, used to write many different spoken languages, such as Danish, German, French, Spanish and English, SignWriting can also be used to write many different sign languages. After all, if many spoken languages can have written versions, why not sign languages?

Resistance Against SignWriting: Why It Is Controversial

Yet even within the Deaf communities, SignWriting has been controversial from the first time it was invented in 1974: either dismissed, laughed at, or scorned.

"Historically, new ideas that create 'social change' are always met with resistance in the beginning, and SignWriting is no exception," points out Valerie Sutton, creator of SignWriter.

Among reasons listed why SignWriting "should not" be accepted:

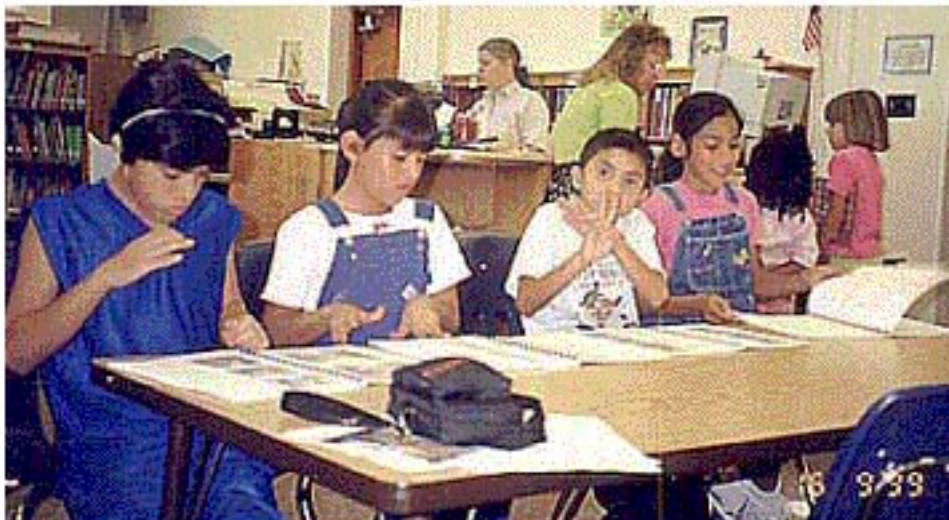
- 1) Signed languages are not supposed to be written
- 2) Deaf people will become isolated and never learn to read and write English
- 3) You have no right to write our language if you are a hearing person
- 4) If I learn it, no one else can read it, so why bother?
- 5) I had trouble enough learning to read and write English, why should I learn something new now as an adult?

- 6) I refuse to learn SignWriting unless other Deaf people back it first!

Yet, as SignWriting continues to evolve, it is gathering greater acceptance, and its many uses, including a possible educational advantage for Deaf and hard of hearing students, is slowly beginning to be sensed by others. Interestingly, while both Deaf and hearing adults struggle with their reactions to SW....

Deaf Children: Their Reactions

Young children respond differently. They're drawn to it, get excited about it, and will do this 'school work' harder, and for longer periods. According to their teachers, they tend to take about six months to learn the basics of SignWriting, a relatively short time in their long academic education. They also learn it more quickly than adults, being younger, unbiased, and more linguistically flexible. Research is currently being undertaken to determine whether SignWriting helps, or doesn't help, these children's ability to read and write English - and, perhaps more importantly, their self esteem. From an elementary Albuquerque, New Mexico school, this eight-years-old young student, Desi Baca, chortles: "It's FUN!....My favorite thing is to learn SW." Asked if she thought it will be hard for deaf people, she signed emphatically (in ASL), "No, it's easy for Deaf people" (because they already know signs). About the SignWriter program, in which one can type in the symbols for SW, she signed emphatically, "I admit I like to use the computer! It's a lot of fun to make up stories, and it is beautiful". When asked to clarify what is beautiful, she pointed to the instructional manual with the signs and SW symbols illustrated in color, and



Mark Twain School Library in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Left to right: Simon, Jazmine, Joe and Desi. The kids are waiting for the SignWriter Computer Program to "boot" on the library computers, and while waiting, they are reading from the SignWriting storybooks.

signed, "I like (the symbols)....they are beautiful"

Another young student, Jazmine Martinez, reminded of the occasion when she found the sign for 'girl' in the SignWriter dictionary and became very excited at finding it, giggled, and commented '(that sign) 'girl', yes, you are right!', then proudly demonstrated some other signs she found using the SignWriter dictionary, such as 'bug' and 'cat'. As to her favorite book, "I read it at home. I sit and look at the signs (written in SW) and then write the word.....I will work for a long time in my room when my mom goes to the store". Other teachers have reported similar reactions.

Implementing SignWriting Into Education

Cecilia Flood, a school counselor who works with 50 students in small groups in two elementary schools and one middle school in Albuquerque, New Mexico, has been implementing SignWriting into her curriculum for the past year. The quotes from the students (above) were videotaped by her. When asked, "Have you been told 'But SignWriting takes too much time in the classroom, and we have to teach these students so much already'?", She responded: "When I first approached classroom teachers about this SignWriting project, (I heard comments such as) 'Oh, that's too much to learn, I don't think this student will be able to handle learning SignWriting as well as learning how to read English'....I have gotten several responses from individual parents.... These concerns range from taking away time spent learning English, to a concern that not enough members of the Deaf community use SW, to a concern that SW will interfere with already

developing literacy skills"

Dealing with Resistance: Just Listen

Asked how she dealt with this, Flood replied: "My response...generally, I don't respond. I just listen. I'm not trying to convince educators, parents, or even Deaf community members that SignWriting is the only way to go.

"I do believe that Deaf and hard of hearing students are indeed smart enough and capable enough language users and learners who can and do organize linguistic information into two separate and distinct languages, ASL and English.

"My hope is that the ethnographic recording (that she is currently doing) of Deaf and hard of hearing students' experiences as they learn to write using SignWriting, will provide significant evidence which will promote greater interest in the investigation of a potential bi-literacy tool. That tool would be the use of SW in bilingual education models for Deaf and hard of hearing students in the U.S."

So Why Should We Use SignWriting To Teach Deaf and Hard of Hearing Students?

Asked why Flood wanted to introduce SignWriting to her students, this is her response:

"To capitalize on language abilities, not language problems. To provide a medium, (SignWriting) that potentially may enhance linguistic and cultural identity and self-empower Deaf and hard of hearing students. "To record the experiential stories of Deaf and hard of hearing SW learners that will significantly inform perspectives on the academic literacy learning experiences of Deaf and hard of hearing students, 'in their own words'. "As the lead instructor of SignWriting, I will attempt to neutralize power relationships that exist in the everyday school literacy learning environment and hope to promote shared power, one that will encourage students and teachers to alternate between teacher and learner roles." Having taught SignWriting for a year now, Flood now recounted how quickly her students took to it:

Younger Children's Ability To Read SW:

"Two of the younger

students (5 & 8 yrs) took to these SW symbols (on flash cards) rather quickly. We were matching the (SW) sign vocabulary with some pictures and illustrations of events that might evoke some of those feelings. "The two students seem to recognize the symbols as a whole and 'read' these signs quickly: SCARED, EXCITED, SAD, HAPPY. The others (older ones) in the group took the lead of the early SW 'readers', and continued with the activity signing what their peers saw on the flash cards. "Even (when I) was ready to move onto another activity with the other three students, the two students wanted to continue the activity on their own, sorting out the SW flash cards that were piled between them matching them with the illustrations provided." Flood and her students continued discussing, creating and sorting out SignWriting symbols.

Middle-School Students' Reactions

"The middle school students initially were more skeptical when I showed some samples of SW to them. I did get some comments like; 'That's weird!', 'But that's hard to learn', 'Why should I learn Sign Writing? I already know and have a lot of experience using ASL' and 'I don't want to learn that stuff, it's too hard'. "I didn't stop there....though I was tempted, I introduced some of those very same skeptics to the SignWriter, the sign language word processor program. They were more interested then and took to using the computer to generate individual signs, then strings of signs, then whole signed comments.

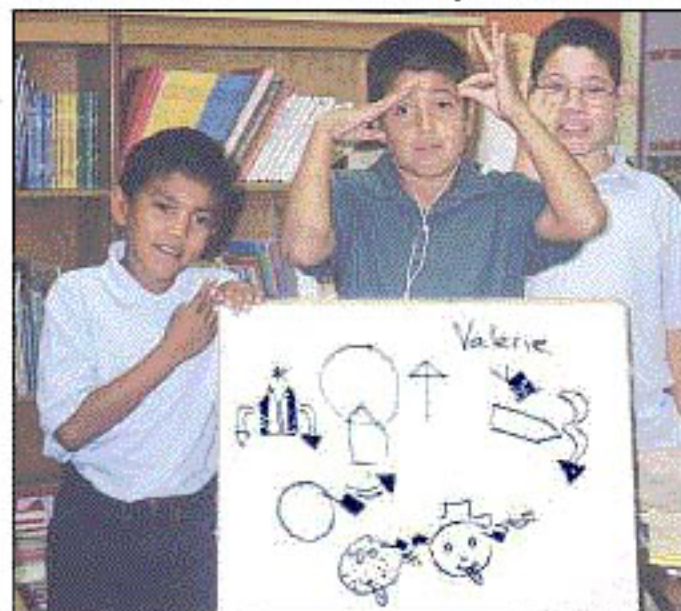
"Typical of young adolescents, their comments focus on what they had done with friends over the weekend, their boyfriends, and school special events. The students pecked away at the computer keyboard with confidence and satisfaction...."Prior to using the SignWriter, I don't think these students paid much attention to how they were signing. Watching two 8th graders at the library computers discussing the palm orientation of a sign not in the dictionary, negotiating....was evidence enough for me to pursue the formal initiation of an ethnographic research project. This project will document the experiences of deaf and hard of hearing students, ages 5- 14, (yes and even the skeptics among them) learning how to write using SignWriting, a way to read and write signs.

What The Future May Hold:

Flood predicted, based on her observations and current research: "Using a yet-to-be-tapped resource, signwriting, deaf and hard of hearing students will not only become better signers, but also better readers and writers, plus they will attain membership in the growing club of bilingual readers and writers in the U.S.A."

Teachers can write or call for a free packet of information on SignWriting:

The SignWriting Literacy Project
The DAC, Deaf Action Committee
For SignWriting
P.O. Box 517, La Jolla, CA,
92038-0517, USA
Voice(858)456-0098
TTY(858)456-0010
Fax(858)456-0020
Email: DAC@SignWriting.org
Web: <http://www.SignWriting.org>



Chaparral Elementary School in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Left to right: The students, Danny, Fernando and Dathan. They are demonstrating their name signs written in SignWriting.