

COLUMNISTS

A Book/Video Review: The "Learn to Read American Sign Language in SignWriting" Package

by **Alexanda Han**

(SignWriting (or sw) is an 'alphabet', or a list of symbols, that can be used to read, write and/or type one's own sign language on paper or the computer screen. 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.)

The "Learning to Read American Sign Language in SignWriting" package comes in a glossy kit which opens up to reveal a video tape stored in an indented pocket. Six books, written in both SignWriting and English, accompany the video tape. Colorful pictures in these books naturally draw children's attention. Due to the glossy, shiny covers and the crisp pages, which are sturdier than most pages, these books promise to withstand years of usual abuse.

The sheer amount of work, thought and detail which has gone into this package to make SignWriting as readable and entertaining as possible is truly astonishing.

First, one watches the videotape, which has Darline Clark-Gunsauls, a native Deaf signer and experienced ASL teacher, sign the following well-known stories: Goldilocks and the Three Bears, Sleeping Beauty, Cinderella, and Snow White. Clark-Gunsauls wears simple, plain yet flattering clothes, with an accompanying simple yet attractive background, so that the stories - in her hands and facial expressions - take prominence and come alive. (One mistake made by story-tellers at times is to wear multi-colored clothes, which makes reading ASL more difficult and thus discourage viewers).

A fluent, expressive signer, Clark-Gunsauls tells the stories so that both young and older children are both fascinated and challenged by the stories. Hearing teachers or parents frequently read literature to their hearing students, without pausing after every word to make sure the children understand; so, too, Clark Gunsauls signs without pausing after every sign. Just as it is not required that hearing students understand each and every word spoken in a story in order to understand and enjoy the story, so, too, young Deaf children do not need to understand each and every sign and its accomodating facial grammar in order to enjoy and gain from Clark-Gunsauls' expressive story-telling.

One might wonder at the somewhat sexist nature of these stories. There's Snow White, who cleans and cooks for the elves; Cinderella and Sleeping Beauty, both of whom are rescued by princes. All these female characters are also Anglo-Saxon (white people), too, and super-beautiful to boot.

Valerie Sutton, executive director of the Center For Sutton Movement Writing, Inc., a non-profit organization, which funds the DAC organization, and who is the original inventor of SignWriting, acknowledges this:

"Of course those stories are not per-

fect! We have a ton of literature on videotape - in ASL. The idea was and still is, that in time I will transcribe those videos too, creating other literature for the Learn To Read ASL Series. (As) you know, SignWriting is used all over the world, and what we do in our little organization here is only a small portion of what is being done worldwide.

"So the question about choices of literature is not as simple as "we wanted those stories". Actually, I didn't! (The decision) was based on the illustrations I already drew from years ago, so that I wouldn't have to pay an illustrator to re-draw these illustrations again, (as well as) what literature had already been published, and which ones had to be re-done with the new SignWriting symbols.....there is no question we need more literature and bigger variety.

"Actually I think Goldilocks was a brave woman! But she also was a vandal!

"And everyone can see the underlying social atti-

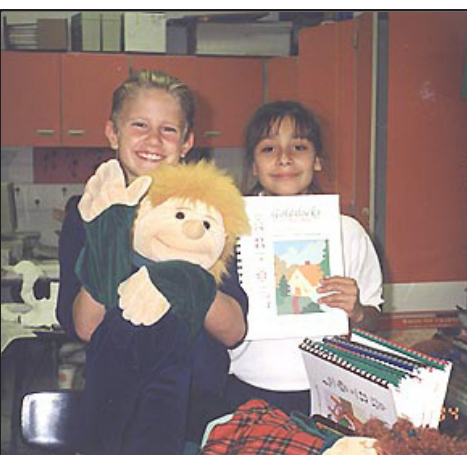
tudes in those old stories - that is for sure!

Darline (Clark-Gunsauls) and I are hoping that

some of the students will start writing and publishing their own stories written in SignWriting - why wait for us and our limitations! And I am sure they will choose other (non-sexist, non-racist) themes."

Already this is happening; stories are starting to be told around the world in written Signs. One example can already be found on the SignWriting web site. But back to the review itself....

From this particular package, the six books, which tell the story of Goldilocks & the Three Bears, range in reading levels from Level One (for young children, in which exercises are provided to practice components of SignWriting) to Level Four, Level Four being the most condensed, advanced



For: "send as is": "Two proud students are standing in front of some of their SignWriting books. New Mexico"

and complex. (Level 4 also has the smallest written Signs).

Kathy Akehurst is a private, experienced tutor in Ontario, Canada, who works with a group of Deaf people, ranging from children to adults. It is a mark of the professionalism of the books that her students had to be persuaded that these books belonged to them: "The students were very pleased with the book although it took some talking to get them to believe they were free to mark and color as much as they wished in such a nice book"

She also observed how "The children really enjoyed the coloring part, and even colored the signwriting symbols. Everyone did their best to write rows of symbols and signs although we all agreed it (quite naturally) made our hands

tired! Still, done in a group it was fun and interesting and some of the more diligent ones practiced on their own until our next meeting".

For Level One, the story is told in very simple English, with large type words and equally large typed Signs.

Level Two and Three books have color-coded Signs. In

other words, for each written Sign, different components of that sign is colored in particular colors, to make it both more attractive for young children (and adults too- like this columnist!), and easier to read. The colors, carefully chosen, are a pleasure to the eyes, and makes the written Signs, even for adults, enjoyable to read.

This is what these colors represent for each written Sign:

Dark Green: Face and Head

Dark Blue: Hands

Dark Red: Movement Symbols

Dark Pink: Contact Symbols

Dark Orange: Punctuation

Black: Arms & Shoulders

This is, as Darline Clark-Gunsauls, director of DAC (Deaf Action Committee), points out, similar to the Montessori method for very young children, in which words are color coded to facilitate greater independent reading. Verbs are colored one particular color, nouns another color, and so forth.

This color-coding continues until Level 4, when all written Signs are printed in black ink only. Clearly, in a world of newspapers and books which are printed in black ink, and it is cheapest to print written materials in black only, it is simply not feasible to have written Signs that are color-coded only.

There's also another book ("Instruction for SignWriting Level 3 & 4"), which includes explanations about



"Darline Clark-Gunsauls, the signer of the four stories in the video, here is teaching a Deaf child in Bluefield, Nicaragua. 1996."

the written (or rather computer-typed) Signs that tells the story of Goldilocks & the Three Bears. These books are ideal for any adult who wants to learn SignWriting themselves so that they can teach it to others - or for any older child who want to teach themselves SignWriting.

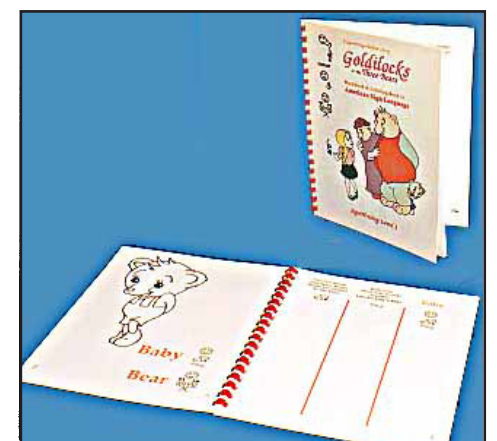
Teachers can contact DAC to obtain copies of the "Learn to Read American Sign Language in SignWriting" Package:

The SignWriting Literacy Project
The DAC, Deaf Action Committee
For SignWriting
P.O. Box 517, La Jolla, CA, 92038-0517, USA

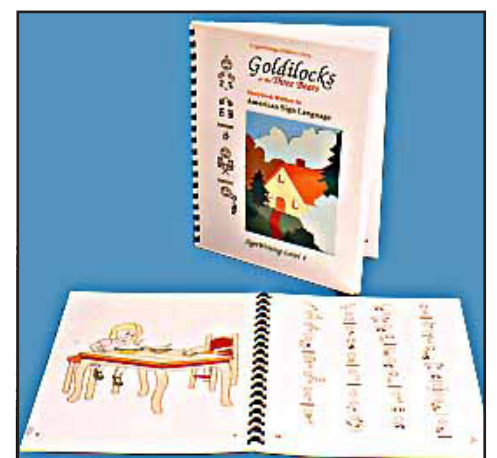
Voice(619)456-0098...TTY(619)456-0010...Fax(619)456-0020

Email::DAC@SignWriting.org

Web: <http://www.SignWriting.org>



for: "level one": "Sample of the "A SignWriting Children's Story: Goldilocks and the Three Bears Workbook and Coloring Book in American Sign Language: SignWriting Level 1"



for: "level 4": "Sample of the "A SignWriting Children's Story: Goldilocks and the Three Bears: Storybook Written In American Sign Language"

COLUMNISTS

A Controversial Approach to Communication: SignWriting, The "Alphabet" of Signs

by Alexandra Han

Twenty-five years after it was invented by a hearing woman and dancer who never originally intended to use her "Sutton Movement Writing" to record sign languages, SignWriting continues to face a great deal of opposition and ridicule even within the signing communities in North America for its primary goal: to create written versions of sign languages, just as spoken languages have their written versions. Yet SignWriting, with its computer software which allows even children to type signs into sentences, may ultimately turn out to be the most accurate way of recording into print form the hundreds of native sign languages that exist worldwide for many purposes, including linguistic (language), educational, or simply reading-for-pleasure purposes.

The Center For Sutton Movement Writing, in California, is the primary advocating organization for SignWriting, which has been used in other countries such as Norway, Nicaragua, Brazil and Denmark, for linguistic and educational purposes. Ironically, even though SignWriting was originally invented in America in a linguistic lab with the advice and assistance of many native ASL signers, Denmark still became the first country to officially adopt SignWriting, using SignWriting in Deaf education and sign language research since 1982.

As for North America itself, only very recently has a few schools of the Deaf begun to consider SignWriting, although "things are changing now. People are now much more positive than before," says Valerie Sutton, inventor of SignWriting and executive director of the Center For Sutton Movement Writing.

But just what exactly is SignWriting? "It is an 'alphabet' - a list of symbols used to write any signed language in the world," replies Sutton. "The SignWriting alphabet can be compared to the alphabet we use to write English, which is the Roman alphabet.

"The Roman alphabet can be used to write many different spoken languages. While each language may add or subtract one or two symbols, the same basic symbols we use to write English are used to write Danish, German, French and Spanish. The Roman alphabet is international, but the languages it writes are not.

"In the same way, the symbols in the SignWriting alphabet are international and can be used to write American Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Norwegian Sign Language, British Sign Language, Dutch Sign Language - any signed language you choose."

As for its value, "SignWriting makes it possible to have books, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries and literature written in signs. It can be used to teach sign and sign grammar to beginning students, or it can be used to teach other subjects, such as math, history, or English to skilled signers."

How did Sutton stumbled into SignWriting? "In my youth, I was a dancer. I am an American who moved to Denmark at age 19, in 1970, to work with the Royal Danish Ballet. I developed a way to read and write all body movement called Sutton Movement

Writing....Just as I preserved the historic dance steps of the Royal Danish Ballet in DanceWriting, I also began writing Danish signs, and even though I did not know what they meant at the time, Deaf people whom I met in Denmark could read the signs and they knew what they meant! I decided that I would dedicate my life to developing the written form for hundreds of "movement based" languages.

"I used to take the bus a lot, at age 19, when I first moved to Copenhagen. I was glad, when I stood on the Danish bus, that there was a way for me to read the signs on the bus, which were written in both Danish and English." Due to this experience, she can identify with some Deaf people's frustration in navigating their way through society. "Years later, in 1984, when I returned to Denmark because SignWriting was being used in the Danish school system, I visited some classes of Deaf children learning to read and write Danish and Danish Sign Language. There, on the walls of the classroom, and in the hallways, were signs written in Danish and Danish Sign Language in SignWriting. It was a feeling of *deja vu*, and a memory I will never forget!"

Why would there be such strong resistance to learning SignWriting? "I lived a life of controversy the moment I started writing signs in 1974", Sutton says cheerfully, pointing out that "Historically, new ideas that create 'social change' are always met with resistance in the beginning, and SignWriting is no exception."

When she was first invited to use her Sutton Movement Writing to record sign languages, "people were still getting used to the idea that signed lan-

The SignWriting Teacher's Forum
...home of...

The SignWriting Literacy Project
...read about teacher's and student's experiences in the classroom...




nothing to do with that "war", but many people were wary of any new idea in Deaf education, because they were steeped in controversy between oralism and Sign Language already." As well, "They were skeptical that a hearing person might respect and want to preserve American Sign Language and other signed languages."

Has something like this been attempted before? Sutton points to a Cherokee Indian chief, Sequoyah, who in the early 1800s fought to do the

used for many years to represent ASL, shows a picture of a person signing a sign, with the written English version beneath the sign. Sutton is adamant that English glosses don't work well even for linguistic purposes: "English glosses are awful and definitely not accurate. There are multiple signs for each English word - so which sign are you choosing when you place an English word on the page? It is totally non-visual. It is wrong to try to write one language with another - if I wrote Danish grammar with English words, the Danes would kill me!" SignWriting, because it records native sign languages far more precisely, does a better job.

Sutton observes how learning SignWriting seems to increase self-esteem for both Deaf children and even some Deaf adults, who then find it easier to learn written English; however, she humorously pointed out that "I don't want to save the Deaf - I have enough problems saving myself - thank you very much!" Her primary goal in SignWriting is to merely record sign languages as precisely as possible so that other people can use them for their own purposes.

SignWriter software can be downloaded for free from the SignWriting Site at <http://www.signwriting.org/>.



What Is SignWriting?

SignWriting is a writing system which uses visual symbols to represent the handshapes, movements, and facial expressions of signed languages. It is an "alphabet" - a list of symbols used to write any signed language in the world.

The SignWriting alphabet can be compared to the alphabet we use to write English, the Roman alphabet. The Roman alphabet can be used to write many different spoken languages. While each language may add or subtract one or two symbols, the same basic symbols we use to write English are used to write Danish, German, French and Spanish. The Roman alphabet is international, but the languages it writes are not.

In the same way, the symbols in the SignWriting alphabet are international and can be used to write American Sign Language, Danish Sign Language, Norwegian Sign Language, British Sign Language, Dutch Sign Language - any signed language you choose.

SignWriting makes it possible to have books, newspapers, magazines, dictionaries, and literature written in signs. It can be used to teach signs and signed language grammar to beginning signers, or it can be used to teach other subjects, such as math, history, or English to skilled signers.

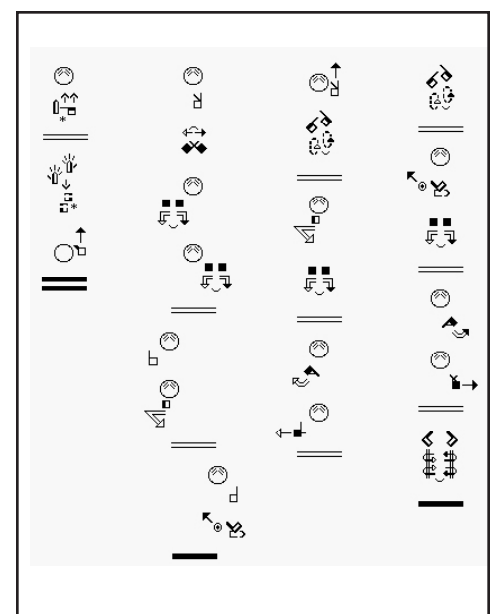
guages were real languages, and that idea was a major social change too. (Deaf people) had been taught that their own language was inferior, so it took them time to adjust to the fact that they could be proud of their own language now. And reading and writing it (their own sign language) was just one more thing, piled on top of all the changes in thinking...It took 25 years for them to get used to ASL and other signed languages as being "true languages". However, "once that idea became more established, the need for writing the language became greater."

"We have all heard about the "war between the oralists and manualists", she adds. "SignWriting certainly has

same thing she is doing, and succeeded: "(He invented) the written form for his language. His own people burned his books and it took him 25 years and the threat of being executed before his own people finally realized the value of preserving their traditions." Today, though, Sequoyah's Cherokee Alphabet is still used by Cherokees.

"SignWriting has been compared to that because we are seeing it being used during the lifetime of the inventor. Most written forms are not used for centuries. English was very slow to be written, and it is only in recent centuries that the average person can read and write English." Compared to English, then, SignWriting took off relatively fast.

English glosses, which have been



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



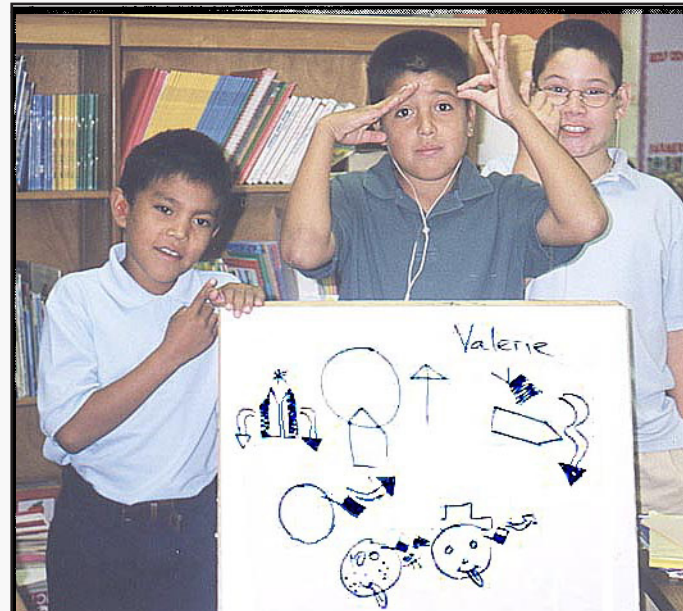
Mark Twain School Library in Albuquerque, New Mexico. Left to right: Simon, Jazmine, Joe and Desi. The kids are waiting for the SignWriter Computer Program to "boot" on the library computers, and while waiting, they are reading from the SignWriting storybooks.

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



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.

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(619)456-0098
TTY(619)456-0010
Fax(619)456-0020
Email: DAC@SignWriting.org
Web: <http://www.SignWriting.org>

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SignWriting Children's Stories

American Sign Language Cinderella, Part 1 SignWriting Level 2 Basic Storybook	American Sign Language Cinderella, Part 2 SignWriting Level 2 Basic Storybook	American Sign Language Goldilocks SignWriting Level 1 Beginning Workbook
American Sign Language Goldilocks SignWriting Level 2 Basic Storybook	American Sign Language Goldilocks SignWriting Level 3 Intermediate Storybook	American Sign Language Goldilocks SignWriting Level 4 Advanced Storybook
American Sign Language Humpty Dumpty SignWriting Level 2 Basic Storybook	Brazilian Sign Language Uma Menina Chamada Kauana A Little Girl Called Kauana	Nicaraguan Sign Language If You Give A Mouse A Cookie

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<http://www.SignWriting.org>