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Voice Off: American Sign Language at RWU

RWU’s sign language courses helps students learn unique skills and communication method in courses where words are rarely spoken

October 30, 2018  |  By Juan Siliezar

BRISTOL, R.I. – There was no talking in the class, not between students sitting at their desks and not from the instructor teaching them. It was so quiet that at times students could hear parts of the lecture next door or pieces of passing conversations from the hall. Despite that, the class on the second floor of the College of Arts and Science building was in full swing. And – using only hand gestures, body expressions and occasional bouts of laughter – the students and the instructor were carrying out a full classroom discussion.

That’s how RWU Adjunct Professor Manuel Martin runs most of his American Sign Language courses at Roger Williams University. Martin, who founded Rhode Island’s American Sign Language Academy and designed the ASL courses at RWU, calls it “voice off” instruction. He believes it focuses students on the single most important aspect of the highly intricate language: the visual component.

The students in his 350-level course are no strangers to his method, with many taking his courses since their freshman year. ASL – a fully formed language in which speakers use a combination of hand movements, facial expressions and postures of the body to express meaning – has been offered at RWU since 2004 and just recently became a Core Concentration option. The language is distinct from English and contains its own rules for pronunciation, word order and grammar. It was established in the early 1800s at the American School for the Deaf in Connecticut.

Because of their experience learning this complex language, students taking ASL at RWU are also not strangers to its unique benefits: the expected and unexpected impacts learning ASL can bring.

“I tell my students, ‘how will you use ASL in the future?’” Martin said. “You don’t know. But you’ll use it and it will be valuable, and when you use it in those situations you’re going to be so thrilled.’”

Already many of his students have encountered powerful moments where they have taken what they learned at RWU and used it to communicate with people who are deaf or hard of hearing in ways that leave a lasting impact.
Take Samantha Pitzi, a junior education studies major from the 350-level course. Over the summer, she worked at a restaurant as a hostess when she noticed a man and woman signing to each other. When the couple went to be seated, she signed “hello” and they lit up with excitement. “We actually had a full conversation,” Pitzi said. “They were so happy I was able to communicate with them.”

Another of Martin’s students worked at a fitness center over the summer where she used ASL to explain to a deaf person how the membership worked and answer their questions. Martin says he periodically receives these emails or calls from students or former students about their conversations with deaf or hard-of-hearing individuals.

“These small things are not earth-shattering,” Martin said. “[But] they mean a lot to the people who are used to struggling so much with communication and they mean a lot to the person who’s able to bridge that gap.”

As with learning any additional language, ASL can be put on a résumé as another skill that makes a student more valuable or sought-after to employers. There are also jobs as interpreters or teachers for the deaf and hearing-impaired. In fact, ASL is becoming a popular skillset in education, especially special education, because studies have shown it helps with child development. Pitzi the education major, for example, believes ASL will help her in a career as a speech pathologist.

Other professional benefits are a bit more nuanced. They include becoming in tune with both one’s own body language and other people’s.

“It is an incredible way to utilize your own body in a way you hadn’t imagined,” said Marisa Rose, a senior accounting and management double major. Rose, whose first language is ASL, grew up with parents who are deaf. She says ASL provides a deep understanding of how people convey themselves through their body language which students can then translate to many professional situations.

“Gestures, facial expressions, and body language are all key aspects of ASL,” she said. “Understanding these and the influence they have on our tone and how we convey ourselves is absolutely beneficial. For business students, they can utilize these skills in negotiations; for criminal justice, during interrogations; [and] psychology majors can read underlying emotions.”

ASL’s focus on body expression and gesture is critical since it is the primary method of communication, but also because the language is so precise and complex that even the slightest wrong gesture or facial expression can alter or completely change the meaning of what you are trying to say. For example, a raise of your eyebrows can make any declarative statement into a question.

Students’ success in picking up on reading body language can be largely attributed to Martin’s voice-off method of teaching. Even in his introductory courses as he starts to teach the alphabet, he is teaching in ASL from day one, leaving it to students to focus on and figure out what he is communicating. And while he does teach many classes conventionally, this method provides students a total immersion into the language. Put simply, Martin, who’s journey with ASL started in 1984 after taking in a deaf foster son, teaches a language developed by deaf people the way a deaf person would teach it.

ASL’s popularity at RWU has been steadily growing and attracts students from many academic disciplines. Just this year, ASL became a Core Concentration at RWU. It allows students like Pitzi and Rose to take a structured five-course exploration of the discipline alongside their major. As part of RWU’s Core Curriculum, a Core Concentration helps students examine the world and appreciate the diversity of communities and participate in them ethically and effectively.

This fits with another significant component of the ASL program: learning about the history and issues regarding deaf and hard-of-hearing people. Students often find it eye-opening and even concerning how current laws or industries such as hospitals, hotels or schools accommodate or don’t accommodate the deaf and hard of hearing. It helps them realize the importance of the communication line they have now unlocked.
“Similar to defeating any ignorance, the way to solve this is increasing the amount of information known about the deaf and hard of hearing,” Marisa Rose said. “Opening up our channels of information – like taking an ASL class at RWU – adds to an individual’s breadth of knowledge, enabling the best education possible.”