

Susan Johnson
 CFAAR600
 Spring I
 Assignment 6.2: Community Lesson Plan
Subject: Chilmark Deaf Community on Martha's Vineyard Island
Theme: Communication
Lesson 1: Make a picture that communicates "you"

Chilmark is a town on the island of Martha's Vineyard. According to the Martha's Vineyard page in Wikipedia (2010), "Martha's Vineyard is located approximately seven miles off the southern coast of Cape Cod. The island has a land area of 87.48 square miles. It is the largest true island of the East Coast of the US" (para.1). Chilmark is located in the *up-island* section of the island, which is more rural and less densely populated than the



down-island section. Chilmark was incorporated as a town in 1694. According to the Chilmark page in Wikipedia (2010), "The town was once known for its unusually high percentage of deaf citizens. In 1854, Chilmark had a deaf population of one in every 25 people, while the national average was one deaf person in 5728" (para.2).



The cause of the deafness was genetic. There was a recessive gene that many people on Martha's Vineyard carried,

and if they married another person with the same gene then there was a chance their children could be born deaf. Genetic deafness first appeared on Martha's Vineyard Island around 1714. The Martha's Vineyard page in Wikipedia (2020) notes, "the island's deaf heritage cannot be traced to one common ancestor and is thought to have originated in the Weald, a region in the English county of Kent, prior to immigration" (para.1).

There were some deaf people living in each of the five towns on the island, but Chilmark had the highest concentration. According to the Martha's Vineyard Sign Language page in Wikipedia (2020), "in a section of Chilmark called Squibnocket, as much as a quarter of the population of 60 was deaf" (para.1).



Genetic deafness in Squibnocket, Chilmark, and the rest of Martha's Vineyard eventually disappeared in the 20th century because more people married and had families

with people who were not from Martha's Vineyard or related to people from the Weald region in Kent, England. Two factors were primarily responsible for this change. First, tourism became very popular and more people starting coming to the island. The local economy started to depend more and more on tourism and less on sheep farming and fishing. Second, more deaf people started going off-island to a school for the Deaf in Hartford CT, and married people they met there. According to the Disability History Museum,



The American School for the Deaf (ASD) is the oldest permanent school for the deaf in the United States. It was founded April 15, 1817 in Hartford CT. It was a state school, and deaf students from all over New England attended. The original name of the school was

The American Asylum, at Hartford, for the Education and Instruction of Deaf and Dumb Persons. (p. 1)



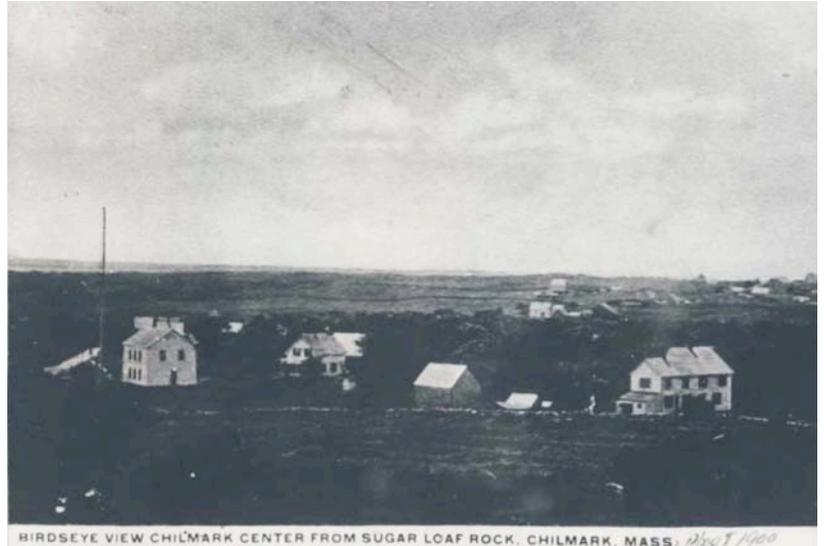
Many Deaf people from Martha's Vineyard attended this school, and their use of Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL) was very important in the development of American Sign Language (ASL). Deaf people were usually called *deaf and dumb*. The word *dumb* in this case means *unable to talk*. Many deaf people could not talk with regular words because they could not



hear what the talk should sound like. This school taught sign language, and became known as the birthplace of the Deaf community in the United States. ASL is the dominant sign language used by deaf people in North America.

While ASL is based on French Sign Language (langue des signes française, or LSF), many signs in MVSL are believed to be Old Kent Sign Language (OKSL), imported from Great Britain in the 1600s when deaf settlers came to New England from the Weald area in Kent, England. Although MVSL was a major influence in the development of ASL, ASL is distinctly different from modern BSL, or BANZSL, or British, Australian and New Zealand Sign Language. One major difference is whether one or two hands are used for spelling and making many of the signs. The history of both British and French sign language is very old, and signs in both languages were passed down from deaf person to deaf person, and to hearing persons as well.

French and British people would all use their sign language every day if there were many deaf people in their community. The people on Martha's Vineyard did this too. Because they were on an island they used the old Kentish Sign Language longer than most other places in the United States, and also developed their own signs for things particular to Martha's Vineyard. Today, this combination of sign languages is called Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (MVSL). There are no



fluent signers of MVSL today, but we do have documents of interviews with older people who knew the language when they were young. According to the MVSL page in Wikipedia, "The last deaf person born into the island's sign language tradition, Katie West, died in 1952. However, a few elderly residents were able to recall MVSL as recently as the 1980s when research into the language began" (para.3). These people are very old now, or have died, so we are lucky to have documents of their stories and memories.



Most residents of Chilmark were either fishermen or farmers. Roads did not exist as we know them today, and people traveled across the Island through *ancient paths*. These were paths originally created by native people, the Wampanoag, through the woods that went to all the island towns. The Squibnocket landscape in Chilmark is dramatically beautiful, with hills, beaches, and great ponds (salt/fresh water ponds). Most farms were sheep farms. Today Chilmark

is famous for stonewalls that were first built for the sheep farms. Back then, the sheep kept the hills clear of brush and trees, and people could see neighboring farms from miles away. People could use sign language to communicate from one farm to another. Transportation on land was not easy, and most residents tended to live and work in Squibnocket. Squibnocket, and other sections of Chilmark such as the fishing village Menemsha, and also neighboring town Gay Head (now called Aquinnah) even father up Island, were well-known ports for ships and fisherman. Often commerce and travel was centered on boats and the sea, and mills for processing grain and wool were also by the water. *Ancient paths* connected mills, ports, market places, as well as connecting the up island and down island communities

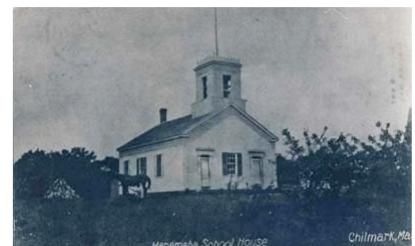
For many years the Squibnocket General Store was the community center for all of Chilmark, including farmers, fishermen, trades people. The store was by the Quitsa Great pond and ancient pathways. People in the community met there to



gossip, play cards, and socialize. What was special about this was that all the residents spoke sign language, even if they were not deaf.

Because deafness in Chilmark was genetic, there were families who had more than one member who was deaf. Many families had lived in Chilmark for hundreds of years, and eventually had become distantly related. This genetic deafness was a recessive gene, so people who did not have deafness in their immediate family but were seventh cousins twice removed could carry the gene and have a child who was deaf. At the time, no one knew about genetics, or why so many people in Chilmark were deaf.

Everyone in the community knew each other and worked together in one way or another. Over time everyone in



Squibnocket and Chilmark knew how to speak in sign language. Hearing people would change easily from spoken language to sign language, and even spoke sign language with other hearing people. Hearing people often used sign language with other hearing people. Many older people in Chilmark have memories and stories similar to what Nora Groce (1985) notes, in her book *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language*, how children signed behind a schoolteacher's back; adults signed to one another during church sermons; and farmers signed to their children across a wide field; fishermen signed to each other from boats where the spoken word would not carry (p.67).



The Chilmark Deaf Community is famous in Deaf Culture because everyone in the town spoke sign language, even if they were not deaf. As a unit, this subject has many possibilities for learning, ranging from the history of farming and fishing, to the history of the town and how it developed, to the beautiful and unique geography. In our community

lesson today we are going to learn about communication. Specifically, we are going to explore how we can communicate visually the meaning of a word. In this case, we are also going to be thinking about how associations influence what a word means to us. What we are going to do is to make a picture that communicates *you*.

According to the BBC (2010) website *Ouch, It's a Disability Thing*,

In Deaf Culture there is a tradition where the community gives a sign name to you.

If you are a hearing person this is particularly important that deaf people give you the sign name. If you make up your own name you might not choose the right sign for the meaning you want and make an embarrassing mistake (para.6)!

Giving a sign name was also a tradition in Squibnocket and Chilmark. Just as the *Ouch, It's a Disability Thing* website (2010) notes, your sign name is about what is most *you*:



They've taken all your habits and mannerisms into account to find a name that best sums you up. Your typical sign name is usually drawn from one of four areas:

- Firstly, it could come from an aspect of your personality, such as talking all the time like my mate Waffle, or Hand-rubber for someone who rubs their hands a lot when they get excited.
- Secondly, it could be something to do with your appearance, like wearing a lot of earrings or jewelry, what kind of hair you have, or make-up.
- Thirdly it could be a play on your name, like *Angel* for someone called *Angela*.
- Finally, it could originate from a hobby or a job - such as playing a certain sport all the time, or being into drama or photography (para.10)

For this exercise we will first think of our own nickname/sign name, but you can also ask anyone to give you one if you wish. We will not actually use sign language to make the name, but we will think and observe in the same way a deaf person might when making up a sign name. Think about one super positive thing in particular that stands out the most about *you*. It could be an interest, something in your appearance, a relationship to a person or a pet, your family or a group you belong to, your favorite clothes. It could be what makes you feel most happy. Whatever feels most special about *you*.

Next, we will make a picture out of collage and crayons, pencil, and paint. You can use any combination of materials, or just one if you want. The only rule is you have to choose pictures that clearly illustrate your nickname/sign name. You can use words in the picture if you really cannot find a picture or draw, but let's try to have it be as much of a picture as we can. We want to try to communicate your nickname/sign name in the picture so when someone looks at it we want him or her to guess who it is, and why he or she could tell.

To start, let's go to our desks and quickly make a list of three things that are the best things about *you*. List what comes to mind. When you have this, come over to the art table.

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Photos courtesy of the Chilmark Free Public Library,
and special thanks to Joan Poole Nash who has allowed the library access to her research material about the Chilmark Deaf Community (which includes these photos).

**BOSTON UNIVERSITY PROGRAMS IN EDUCATION
LESSON PLAN FORMAT
Art Education Department**

TEACHER'S NAME Susan Johnson

DATE(S) OF LESSON February 2010

SCHOOL Middle **GRADE** 5/6

LENGTH OF LESSON 2 periods

TITLE of lesson: **Make a picture that communicates *you***

RELATIONSHIP TO THE UNIT: *(Theme: Communication)*

How we can communicate visually the meaning of a word. In this case, we are also going to be thinking about how associations influence what a word means to us.

RELATIONSHIP TO LIFE: It's important to think about using all senses, and also about how all our senses and associations work together to help us communicate. It's also very important to think about the differences between people, and how the loss of a sense does not diminish a person. Everyone can learn from each other in a community, and sometimes a problem can turn out to have unexpected benefits when people work together.

I. PROBLEM/ACTIVITY

Day 1

We will look at a Power Point presentation about the history of Chilmark and the Deaf Community there, and about Sign Language. If possible, we will have a visitor demonstrate American Sign Language.

Day 2

We will think up nickname/sign names and make a picture that illustrates what they mean. We won't use sign language to make the names, but incorporate the idea of how sign names are thought up by distinctive aspects of a person. We will think of very positive aspects to use.

II. GOAL(S)

In our community lesson today we are going to learn about communication. Specifically, we are going to explore how we can communicate visually the meaning of a word. We are also going to be thinking about how associations influence what a word means to us. What we are going to do is to make a picture that communicates *you*.

II. OBJECTIVE(S)

- 1) The students will think about and select their own nickname/sign name (and can also ask anyone to give one if they wish). We will not actually use sign language to make the name, but we will think and observe in the same way a deaf person might when making up a sign name. We will think about and select one super positive thing in particular that stands out the most about *you*. It could be an interest, something in appearance, a relationship to a person or a pet, family or a group they belong to, or favorite clothes. It could be what makes one feel most happy. Whatever feels most special about *you*.
- 2) We will make a picture out of collage and crayons, pencil, and paint. Students can use any combination of materials, or just one if they want. The only rule is they have to choose pictures that clearly illustrate their nickname/sign name. They can use words in the picture if they really cannot find a picture or draw, but we will try to have it be as much of a picture as we can. Student should want to try to communicate a nickname/sign name in

the picture so when someone looks at it we want him or her to guess who it is and why he or she could tell.

RESOURCES AND MATERIALS

Power Point Presentation, a visitor, if possible, to demonstrate sign language. Paper, pencils, watercolor paint and brushes, crayons, magazines, glue, scissors.

MOTIVATION

You use all your senses to communicate. If you lose the use of a sense, you could develop more sensitivity in other areas to compensate.

Topic question

- 1) Which of your senses do you think is the most important for communication?

Association Questions

- 1) How many senses do we have?
- 2) Have you ever pretended that you have lost one of your senses?
- 3) Does anyone know how to speak American Sign Language?
- 4) Does anyone know anyone who is deaf?
- 5) Everyone take a moment to think about this.

Visualization Questions

- 1) What do you think it might be like to be deaf?
- 2) Do you ever think of your personality as a picture or a gesture?
- 3) Could you make your own sign language to go with your picture?

Transition Questions

- 1) Do you think you could learn sign language, if you do not already know it?
- 2) Do you think you could have lived in Chilmark 100 years ago?
- 3) Do you think you understand more about what it feels like to be deaf?

Maybe you can think about this as you work on your picture. Let's go to our desk and think quickly now of three super things about you, and write them down.
As soon as you have done this, I would like you to come over to the supply area.

VI. PROCEDURES

Day 1

- 1) PowerPoint presentation about the history of Chilmark and the Chilmark Deaf Community, and guided discussion.
- 2) A demonstration of American Sign Language.

Day 2

- 1) Brief discussion, recap, with focus on communication and language.
- 2) We will learn about sign names.
- 3) We will think of a sign name (not with sign language) and make a picture that illustrates what the name represents about us.
- 4) We will talk about our sign names as we work on the pictures.
- 5) If we have enough time we will hang them up and try to guess some or all of them mean (depending on the time left).
- 6) *Distribution:* Central table with magazines and craft materials. Students come to supply area for paper, scissors, glue, pencils, crayons, and smock if needed.
- 7) *Duration:* Two class periods
- 8) *Clean up:* Students return art supplies to supply area, wash hands.
- 9) *Conclusion:* Summarize the lesson goals that were accomplished, give positive reinforcement about the finished pieces. If appears that we will run out of time, I will

decide to summarize and give positive feedback while we are working.

VII. EVALUATION

- 1) Did the students listen and pay attention to the Power Point demonstration? Did they seem engaged in the any aspects of this subject? Which aspect seems to get the best response (history, geography, special needs, art making)?
- 2) Did they figure out at appropriate sign name (that had genuine meaning for them), and were they interested in creating the illustration for it? Did they succeed in completing the illustration?
- 3) How did they interact with each other in the studio time? Did they talk about their sign names and share anything about the pictures with as they worked?
- 4) Did they stop and clean up appropriately?
- 5) Assessment: Artwork; In-Process Behavior; Guided Discussions.