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Bringing Sign Language Back to Martha's Vineyard

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Abstract

Made possible through community-based research, a team involving a professor and students from Clemson University and two residents of Martha's Vineyard undertook a timely and insightful sign language proliferation endeavor. Understanding that the island was once home to a shared signing community (see Kisch, 2008 regarding the unique communities where deaf and hearing members know and use sign language and experience ease of communication), the team engaged in a project aimed at restoring signing and sign language to the island life. Although the island is no longer home to numerous deaf residents, Martha's Vineyard can still become a sign language friendly community, catering to deaf tourists that visit the island and a small number of deaf people living on the island. The research team's work includes creating a webinar to teach hearing islanders entry level American Sign Language and utilizes the concept of Universal Design (UD) for promoting widespread sign language use in communities and society at large (Cripps & S. Supalla, 2012; S. Supalla et al., 2012/2020). With the Martha's Vineyard project, the research team embraced UD principles to help fulfill inclusion for deaf people. A total of 16 hearing islanders were recruited to participate in an interview procedure where they shared their comments and suggestions for changes to the webinar prototype. The team relied on the feedback to make improvements with the anticipation of having the webinar posted on the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce's website.

Introduction

Readers may find the topic of this paper to be thought provoking regarding bringing sign language back to Martha's Vineyard. In the literature, many references have been made to Martha's Vineyard as an island off the Massachusetts coast where a shared signing community prevailed from the 17th century through the 20th century (Bahan & Poole-Nash, 1996; Groce, 1985; Lane et al., 2011). What makes Martha's Vineyard special lies in how *both* deaf and hearing residents were known for signing and knowing a sign language and they communicated with each other with ease. Martha's Vineyard lost its shared signing community status in the 1950s when the last deaf resident, Katie West, passed away. However, the living hearing islanders still remembered how to sign. Later when the signing hearing islanders passed away (while others moved away from the island), the phenomenon of widespread signing on the island finally ceased to exist (Bahan & Poole-Nash, 1996; Groce, 1985).

For this paper, the shared signing community phenomenon of Martha's Vineyard is too good of a thing to be left as a bygone footnote in American history. Helping the island become sign language friendly again is a social change that can be facilitated through community-based research. The attention is on understanding how modern technology, especially webinars, serves as a source for learning how to sign. Equally important is how entry level ASL needs to be taught to the Martha's Vineyard community.

Let's talk about the shared signing community term that was introduced in 2008 through the work of a scholar named Shifra Kisch. This scholar explained that the unique sociolinguistic phenomenon for Martha's Vineyard had been found in other communities around the world as well. This scholar wrote about the motivation for her coinage of the shared signing community term as follows:

> So far, a number of comparable signing communities have been documented. Like the former Martha's Vineyard and present-day Al-Sayyid, all involve communities where high rates of deafness occur, an indigenous sign language is shared by many hearing people, and a relative lack of disablement has been observed...[t]hese cases include a Mayan village in Yucatan (Johnson, 1991; Shuman, 1980a, 1980b), Desa Kolok in Bali (Branson et al., 1996, 1999), Ban Khor in Thailand (Woodward, 2003; Nonaka, 2004), and Adamorobe in Ghana (Nyst, 2007). [A]ttempts have been made to encompass them in broader classifications. I maintain that existing attempts are insufficient and are actually set up to classify sign languages or Deaf communities. They subsequently impose the logic of these typologies on the above cases, overlooking many of their unique social features. Lacking any other inclusive label for those comparable cases, I [thus created] the term shared signing communities (p. 286).

The shared signing community phenomenon features hearing people being signers. It is an important highlight that this factor creates a "relative lack of disablement" for deaf people in Kisch's own wording. Sadly, it is normal for a society to be strictly made up of speakers who can hear and use one or more spoken languages and are ignorant of any sign language. The ramifications for deaf people living in this type of society are negative, including how medicalized their condition becomes. Profound hearing loss has been identified as a serious and debilitating disability, for example. Had more hearing people known how to sign, deaf people's lives would have been dramatically improved. Right now, deaf people find themselves needlessly disabled in communication when hearing people do not sign their language (see Lane, 1995, 2002 for further discussion on the disability model for deaf people in the United States). Hearing people could have been signers all along to help alleviate the barriers involved. In the modern United States where much attention has been expended on people with disabilities, the incentive for hearing people to learn and use a sign language remains generally poor (Cripps & S. Supalla, 2012).

In the United States and many countries around the world, deaf people understandably feel frustrated and burdened as a community that includes little or no support from a larger society. Deaf people are known for living their lives as linguistic minority members (e.g., Charrow & Wilbur, 1989; Lane et al., 1996; Reagan, 1995), and they are especially concerned over the years about the need for deaf children to experience learning and master American Sign Language (ASL). The recent introduction of language deprivation as a concept in the literature suggests much work needs to be done to ensure that deaf children are exposed to ASL and are brought up in a rich signing environment (e.g., M. L. Hall et al., 2019; W. C. Hall, 2017; Humphries et al., 2016; Murray et al., 2019).

The risk for language deprivation is high, given the demographic fact that most deaf children (more than 90%) are born to hearing families that speak one or more languages. Granted, some hearing parents become proactive in learning ASL to help create a signing environment at home with their deaf children. However, others are less successful for a variety of reasons (see Snoddon, 2008 and 2009 for further discussion on this topic). With deaf children who are born to deaf parents (less than 10%), the situation is more positive with the parents being signers. Deaf parents view their deaf children learning and using sign language in the same way as hearing parents do with hearing children learning spoken language (see Mitchell & Karchmer, 2004 for more demographic information concerning deaf people).

Kisch's reference to sign language being used on Martha's Vineyard as indigenous to the islanders is noteworthy. According to the historical sources, ASL was not established as a national sign language until 1817 when the first permanent school for deaf children was founded in Hartford, Connecticut (e.g., Moores, 2000; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). Given that a deaf educator from France played a key role in founding the Hartford school, French Sign Language was transplanted from Europe to the United States, which created an impact on how deaf people sign today (Lane, 1984; see T. Supalla & Clark, 2015 for further discussion on the historical background of ASL).

At the same time, signing and sign language were already long in existence on Martha's Vineyard. It is reasonable to propose that sign language contact occurred between the American mainland and the island with its indigenous sign language. Many deaf children from the island are known for going to the Hartford school and thus being exposed to a different sign language (Groce, 1985). According to the historical sources, ASL emerged as a new language after the Hartford school's founding, and has since dominated the North American continent, which includes the United States and parts of Canada to this day. The scholars who have studied the shared signing community phenomenon on Martha's Vineyard for the last several decades had called the indigenous sign language used on the island Martha's Vineyard Sign Language (or MVSL; Poole-Nash, 2015). Only recently did Power and Meier (2024) dispute the naming of the island's sign language as MVSL and propose that it be called home signs.

It is not this paper's intention to continue the discussion over naming Martha's Vineyard's indigenous sign language (e.g., MVSL vs. home signs). More research is needed in understanding the indigenous sign language as used on Martha's Vineyard and the potential language contact situation (with French Sign Language and ASL) that ensued after the founding of the Hartford school. The story of Martha's Vineyard's indigenous sign language deserves a revisit with more information at a later time.

This paper will use more general terminology, including signing and sign language concerning Martha's Vineyard. Equally important is the fact that ASL has been targeted as the sign language for helping the island become sign language friendly once again. The paper's attention is thus on how sign language can proliferate on the island for the 21st century.

Initiating the Research Project

The research project on Martha's Vineyard had its start with the second author of this paper, Dr. Jody Cripps who teaches ASL and Deaf Studies in the Department of Languages at Clemson University. Dr. Cripps is deaf and a native signer and had published on the topic of Martha's Vineyard. It was through

teaching and talking with students that he thought about making contacts on the island. Dr. Cripps had one class that required students to read Nora Groce's 1985 book, *Everyone Here Spoke Sign Language: Hereditary Deafness on Martha's Vineyard*. Dr. Cripps could not help but wonder if there was a way to restore signing and sign language to Martha's Vineyard.

In this way, Dr. Cripps became interested in doing community-based research. Strand et al. (2003) explained that the community-based research is a qualitative method that promotes "a partnership of students, faculty, and community members who collaboratively engage in research with the purpose of solving a pressing community problem or effecting social change" (p. 3). Dr. Cripps saw that one beneficial social change to take place on Martha's Vineyard would be the island becoming sign language friendly. Right now, the island is made up of a population that mirrors the rest of the United States with hearing people that generally do not sign.

To be clear, Dr. Cripps is aware of the fact that today's Martha's Vineyard is very different from the island of the past. Recall Kisch's quoted discussion that shared signing communities uniformly have a strong presence of deaf people in terms of demographics. Historically, Martha's Vineyard had a greater number of deaf people in proportion to hearing people than what was found on the American mainland. This presence of deaf people apparently created a strong incentive for hearing people who lived on the island to know and use sign language. Geographically, Martha's Vineyard is a small place with a close-knit community of islanders. Deaf people were highly visible, thus understandably causing the rise of the shared signing community.

For contemporary Martha's Vineyard, Dr. Cripps recognizes the need for a strong rationale concerning sign language proliferation on the island. The strong genetic pool for hearing loss among the islanders has long been dissipated (which results in a lower chance of having deaf children). Martha's Vineyard's rural and seafaring lifestyle also gave way to the island becoming a popular tourist destination. An average total of 740,000 visitors come to the island on a yearly basis, mostly during the summer seasons. This figure does not include Martha's Vineyard's nearly 20,800 full-time and 200,000 part-time residents (Carolina Cooney, email communication, July 16, 2024; Elvin, 2023; Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce, 2024).

If there is a good argument for Martha's Vineyard becoming sign language friendly, it would be related to Universal Design (UD). UD is a highly relevant conceptualization that supports the widespread use of sign language in modern societies, including the United States (see the paper that Dr. Cripps co-authored on this topic, Cripps & S. Supalla, 2012 and also S. Supalla et al., 2012/2020). It is not about whether there is a strong presence of deaf people (as reported for the Martha's Vineyard of the past), but rather about how signing and sign language will greatly benefit a community or society.

S. Supalla et al. (2020) shared some ideas on signing and sign language pertaining to UD. People who can hear and speak need to have alternative communication at their disposal, which could be signing. Native Americans were once widely known for being signers in addition to being speakers, especially during the time before European arrival on the North American continent. The prevalence of shared signing communities among various tribes greatly benefited those Native Americans who were deaf, for example. The example of Plains Indian Sign Language points to the relevance of signing and sign language for universal human experiences (see Bickford & McKay-Cody, 2018 and McKay-Cody, 2022 for further discussion on this topic).

For the modern United States, it is important to note that hearing people already gesture with their hands, which is naturally occurring and non-linguistic in nature. Signing and sign language rather belong to the linguistic domain. When hearing people only speak one or more languages, they lose the linguistic experience of communicating in an entirely different modality, which is visual and gestural. If deaf people have been benefitting from sign language as an invaluable linguistic tool and skill for themselves over the years, hearing people could and should be part of this experience as well (S. Supalla et al., 2020).

There are practical applications for providing the sign language experience for hearing people in general. According to S. Supalla et al., one clear example would be how people can sign rather than speak when present in a noisy environment. The other benefits of signing include being able to communicate over a

great distance and through glass. Elderly people are widely known for experiencing hearing loss and would communicate better when they know how to sign. The current popularity with baby signs among hearing families suggests that signed communication is a worthy and viable asset (e.g., Acredolo et al., 2009; Briant, 2018; Doherty-Sneddon, 2008). Very young children who can hear are known for not having the muscular coordination skills developed for speaking early enough to satisfy their communication needs. They are able to rely on signing while waiting for the time that they start to speak clearly and intelligibly.

Of course, deaf people will experience benefits associated with UD, when more hearing people in society can communicate with them in sign language. Let's think about a deaf child born to hearing parents with society embracing UD and these parents already knowing how to sign. Parents would no longer find themselves ill-prepared when learning that their child is deaf. With UD, society at large will naturally be supportive of ASL as an alternative to spoken language (S. Supalla et al., 2020). Deaf people thus have a strong desire for social change. They are well aware that during a large portion of American history, sign language was subject to stigma. The deaf community had (and still has to some extent today) experienced discrimination related to their access to learning sign language and using it in school (e.g., Baynton, 1996; Moores, 2000; Snoddon, 2009, 2020; Van Cleve & Crouch, 1989). A society committed to learning sign language would help combat the sign language stigma that affects deaf people's lives in a profound way.

Dr. Cripps is drawn to the fact that New Zealand is currently working hard on becoming a sign language friendly country. The recognition of New Zealand Sign Language (NZSL) as one of the country's three official languages in 2006 (McKee, 2005-2006) can be described as an initial step towards the implementation of UD. NZSL now enjoys an equal status with English and Maori, the language of Indigenous people who lived in the region prior to the European arrival in the 18th century. With Maori, New Zealand is committed to having linguistic minority groups feel included in the country. Understanding that deaf people as signers comprise a linguistic minority group, hearing New Zealanders (who traditionally speak one or more spoken languages) are now encouraged to learn the country's sign language. Schools are targeted for teaching students NZSL so that in time, many, if not all hearing citizens in the country will know how to sign and be able to communicate with deaf people (see Cripps & S. Supalla, 2012 for more information on the sign language proliferation movement in New Zealand).

There are other interesting UD developments that took place in New Zealand. For one, Air New Zealand, has the in-flight safety demonstration signed. The cabin crew also sign the announcements and service offerings (of course, in addition to English being spoken on the plane). It is easy to imagine or understand how appreciative the deaf airline passengers are when the crew members communicate with them in their own language, NZSL.

In addition, Air New Zealand provides opportunities for the hearing passengers who do not know to sign to learn NZSL. Onboard information cards are made available to illustrate helpful signs. Being on a flight can be boring and unproductive, but using the time to learn NZSL is a smart way to help fulfill the social cause of UD. The passengers can practice signing by asking for more soda in NZSL from the flight attendant, for example (see Doran, 2024 for more information on the NZSL developments with Air New Zealand).

Also relevant to UD is how some hearing people may become interested in learning more NZSL after an exposure to signing and sign language aboard Air New Zealand. They can decide to study sign language through a formal class in person or online. In these ways, New Zealand's airline has helped establish a feeder system where people can start thinking about learning more NZSL and take action to achieve this goal.

For this paper, the opportunity to learn entry level sign language is of critical importance. Hearing people in society need to have a good starting point for their sign language learning experience. Starting with something small as with NZSL is strategic, as learning a new language can be intimidating for many people. Deaf people would be most grateful for hearing people being able to sign, even for the single word 'thank you', for example. What was discussed for Air New Zealand stands as a model for how to initiate sign language proliferation.

With New Zealand as an inspiration, Dr. Cripps contacted a hearing person, Lynn Thorp, living on Martha's Vineyard after learning about this person's aim to revive indigenous sign language on the island (Remer, 2024). Thorp has been volunteering to teach ASL at a library on the island. This person felt honored when asked to join the research team to investigate the prospect of the island becoming sign language friendly. Thorp then urged Dr. Cripps to make contact with Nancy Gardella, the island's Chamber of Commerce Director, which he did. In response, Gardella gladly agreed to be on the research team. Two ASL students, Brooke Turell and Jaylin Dillard from Clemson University also joined the research team, and they are the first and third authors of this paper. As part of their project, both students focused on editing ASL videos that will help facilitate sign language proliferation on Martha's Vineyard. More discussion on the ASL videos will follow shortly. While Gardella does not know how to sign, this did not stop her from supporting the sign language proliferation idea for Martha's Vineyard as she is aware of the island's rich sign language heritage and is proud of it.

The product that the research team agreed to create is an introductory ASL webinar that will be posted on Martha's Vineyard's Chamber of Commerce's website. Although Martha's Vineyard has a strong tourism industry that includes many restaurants and hotels, they are ill-prepared for receiving deaf visitors. A number of deaf visitors have visited Martha's Vineyard to see the landmarks that are tied to the island's rich sign language heritage. More than 200 deaf individuals visit Martha's Vineyard annually (Nancy Gardella, personal communication, November 20, 2021). Thus deaf people play a role in supporting Martha's Vineyard's economy. Finally, there are four known deaf people that live on the island as residents and it makes good business sense to have the ASL webinar set up and running (see Remer, 2024 for the portrayal of a deaf resident living on the island).

Report on the ASL Webinar Development

During one of the research team meetings, Dr. Cripps was asked to help create the introductory ASL webinar for use on Martha's Vineyard, and he accepted. Other members of the team recognized that Clemson University has greater resources to create the ASL webinar. For example, Dr. Cripps could rely on help from his students to produce the webinar. Many students at Clemson University take ASL as their foreign language for study, and Turell and Dillard on the research team learned sign language this way and were anxious to help.

It is important to keep in mind that Martha's Vineyard started its own initiative for the island to become sign language friendly in the 2010s. Several islanders became proactive with recognition for the island's rich sign language heritage. This led to one of Martha's Vineyard's museums creating an exhibit on the historical shared sign community phenomenon on the island (see Morningstar, 2023, 2024 and Remer, 2023 for more information on this exhibit).

The fact that the Oak Bluffs library (as well as other libraries on the island) offer ASL classes must not be overlooked. There is an elementary and high school on the island that offer ASL classes as well (Remer, 2024). Martha's Vineyard is clearly engaged in sign language proliferation under the banner of Universal Design or UD. However, what was missing is teaching ASL at an entry level. Therefore the decision was made to produce an introductory ASL webinar for the island.

As a separate note, Martha's Vineyard has a television show called MV Signs Then and Now under Martha's Vineyard Community Television. Thorp is the producer and director for the show and also serves as the signing host on the show. It is important to note that a number of islanders have engaged in their own research for understanding the island's unique sign language history. Joan Poole-Nash is an example of one who has a long family history on the island. She has a number of scholarly papers published and participated in several videos that cover Martha's Vineyard's indigenous sign language.

In consideration of Martha's Vineyard's varied efforts supporting signing and sign language, the islanders' attachment to the island's history is strong. The introductory ASL webinar production in the

collaboration with Clemson University thus represents the latest accomplishment. Figure 1 shows the webinar's webpage with the title: *Signed Language for Everyone*. Any interested islander has the opportunity to click the link and open the webinar and start learning ASL. Please note that the webinar as developed is the original version and was subject to revisions. More discussion on this will follow shortly. Confirming the collaborative effort involved, the webpage includes three logos representing Clemson University's Department of Languages, Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce and MV Signs Then & Now.

Figure 1: Introductory ASL Webinar's Webpage

When working on the original ASL webinar, Dr. Cripps and his students came up with the content for how the sign language should be taught as an introduction. Some references to Martha's Vineyard were made in the content to help make the product more relevant for the island experience. This webinar includes the manual alphabet (ABC's) for the islanders to learn in addition to signing. The content breakdown for the ASL webinar is as follows:

Introductory Vocabulary and Phrases
Dialogues with Peers
Themes
- Greetings
- Locations at Martha's Vineyard
- Things to Do at Martha's Vineyard

For the next step, Dr. Cripps and his students put together a research study that investigated how the Martha's Vineyard community saw the ASL webinar. Please understand that the webinar is for the islanders, and their input is valuable and the webinar is thus subject to revisions whenever appropriate. The following questions were asked of the islanders:

1. How would you describe the webinar you just saw?
2. Will this webinar be helpful with your learning sign language? If yes, how? If no, why?
3. Are there any suggestions for improving the webinar?

Given that Thorp and Gardella are full-time residents of Martha's Vineyard, they helped recruit a total of 16 islanders to participate in the research study. All participants were aged 18 or older and most were Caucasian females who were over 40 years old. The participants either lived on the island full-time or part-time. They were hearing and had either minimal or no sign language knowledge. Some participants joined the study in person, whereas others participated in Zoom interviews online.

The participants were instructed to view the webinar from the beginning to end and answer the three study questions. The data were analyzed to determine thematic similarities and then categorized. Categories were tallied to show the number of commonalities between participants' answers.

Dr. Cripps and his students made observations on the islanders' responses to the questions. Their focus was on whether the webinar could be fixed to accommodate the islanders' comments and suggestions for change and if not, explain why (see Creswell & Creswell, 2022 for more information on the qualitative research method as discussed up to this point).

As an endnote, Dr. Cripps and his students saw that the research project was explained properly to the participants before the study began. This includes the participants understanding that their responses would be video recorded and used for research purposes. Each participant read and signed a consent form. The project was approved by Clemson University's Institute Review Board (IRB2021-0666).

Feedback from the Islanders on the ASL Webinar

Comments study participants made to the first question are shown below.

How would you describe the webinar you just saw?	# of Participants
Liked the introduction to sign language through learning introductory signs	7
Too much information was presented or presented too fast	6
Webinar was easy to understand	2
Confused on the way the information was presented	2
Wanted a webinar that was more simplified and only focused on basic terms	1

According to the data, the largest number of participants liked the way ASL is taught in the webinar. The signs targeted for learning were recognized at the entry level. Two participants remarked that the webinar was easy to understand; however, some participants felt the webinar needed some improvements. A sizable number of participants felt that the webinar was "too much and too fast", and two participants stated that the webinar was confusing in its delivery of information. One participant asked for simplification of the webinar.

In response, changes were made to the webinar by having the ASL learning content broken into seven videos (instead of one in the original version), so that viewers can open and view one video at a time. This new design lessens the pressure on the learning process, and the content becomes more clear as well.

The webinar's new design with seven videos is as follows:

Manual ABC's

Everyday Signs, Part 1

Everyday Signs, Part 2

Things to Do in Martha's Vineyard, Part 1

Things to Do in Martha's Vineyard, Part 2

Business Signs, Part 1

Business Signs, Part 2

Comments study participants made to the second question are shown below.

Will this webinar be helpful with your learning sign language?	# of Participants
Webinar was helpful in learning basic signs	9
Wanted a fingerspelling demonstration	3
Webinar was helpful if presented with a situation where an islander needed to sign	2
Wanted more ways of learning (e.g., dialogues to see variation between signers)	1
Signs presented within the webinar weren't helpful to new learners	1

The data demonstrates additional support for entry level learning of ASL with the webinar. Nine participants commented that the webinar was helpful for learning basic signs, although some participants pointed out areas to be addressed before the webinar would be more helpful for learners. For example, three participants asked for a fingerspelling demonstration, and the revised webinar now has a model engaging in fingerspelling exercises, which is a more satisfactory set-up for learners.

The comment that two participants made asking that islanders become part of the video is a production challenge. Thus the incorporation of realistic situations with actors will hopefully be done with the next generation of the webinar. However, due to budgetary constraints the decision to have ASL students converse in ASL at different locations around Clemson University is the reasonable response for now. This should help give learners a more realistic feeling for the webinar, as the original version was produced in a studio setting, which is more artificial and understandably not appealing.

The next comment regarding the webinar mentions having more opportunities to see variations between signers. Thus more signing models were recruited in the revised webinar. Learners will now see how signers compare with each other when engaging in a conversation, for example. The fact that Clemson University has many ASL students came in handy.

The one comment that confused Dr. Cripps and his students stated that the webinar's choice of signs was not helpful for new learners. Many participants in the study commented that the signs targeted for learning in the webinar were basic and appropriate. The researchers chose to leave the ASL vocabulary in the webinar alone.

Comments study participants made to the third question are shown below.

Are there any suggestions for improving the webinar?	# of Participants
Fingerspelling learning and practice should be slower	3
Needed an introductory statement to avoid confusion	3
Wanted a webinar focused on Martha's Vineyard activities	3
Wanted a way to let signers know they were not fluent but had tools	3
Wanted local vernacular included	2
An audio component was needed	2
Wanted visual aids to help the learning process	1

Three participants requested a slower presentation of fingerspelling (i.e., manual ABC's) in the webinar, however, Dr. Cripps and his students responded that slowing down fingerspelling can be tricky. Slow fingerspelling is not necessarily representative of how deaf signers normally spell and can give learners a false sense of confidence. The solution to this lies in having two fingerspelling runs with the first at the normal pace and the second at a slowed pace for the revised webinar. Learners have the opportunity to observe what normal fingerspelling looks like and then study the slow version for learning purposes.

Three participants noted the need for an introductory statement, and Dr. Cripps and his students responded by making a new set of introductions and included them in the webinar. For example, the video with the manual ABC's now has a brief introduction, such as signing "Hi! Ready to learn the ABC's?" in ASL. Learners should be less confused and have a better understanding of what to expect in learning ASL.

There were three participants commenting on more inclusion of Martha's Vineyard activities in the ASL webinar. Dr. Cripps and his students expanded the webinar's dialogues to include visiting a museum, going to the library, being on a bus tour, and so on. Those activities are common for the island lifestyle.

Dr. Cripps and his students agree with the other suggestion made needing to assure learners that knowing entry level ASL provides them with a tool to achieve basic communication with deaf people. In many cases, learners experience fear in trying ASL with deaf people as they lack full proficiency. What learners need to know is that deaf people are pragmatic about the varying signing skills that prevail among hearing people. Deaf people are used to this experience and will likely accommodate to such reality. Out of courtesy, learners will need to state that they know only a little ASL when trying to communicate with a deaf person, for example.

Dr. Cripps and his students suggest that a special commentary be made and posted on the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce's website as a prerequisite to opening the ASL webinar's link. The commentary will allow learners to either read or listen to a person speaking on the importance of ASL and the idea of sign language proliferation for the island. This commentary will help learners know what to expect from learning entry level ASL and how to handle this new skill.

Pertaining to two other suggestions that participants made, they referenced having the webinar voiced over in English using the local vernacular, for example, having Martha's Vineyard town, West Tisbury spoken as "West Tis". Dr. Cripps is a deaf person, and feels uncomfortable about those proposed features for inclusion in the webinar. The original version is silent as is the revised webinar. The reason for this is simple. Anyone who desires to learn ASL needs to respect deaf people and their way of life.

Additionally, readers should consider the research finding that hearing English while trying to learn ASL can be distracting for learners (see Rosen et al., 2014 for further discussion on this topic). Readers are also encouraged to consider the fact that the conventional ASL instruction practices in the United States include having ASL taught and learned silently. This has clear ramifications for the webinar under development here.

The last suggestion made is in regard to visual aids in the ASL webinar. Dr. Cripps and his students noted that some photos of Martha's Vineyard were included in the original and revised versions of the webinar. Revising further, the webinar adopted another type of visual aid, which is English captions. The captioning on the revised webinar allows learners to have some support from their native language, English, as they learn ASL. They can read captions when viewing a signing model for a better understanding of what is signed in ASL. While captions are not normally utilized in the field of ASL instruction, they can be helpful in this situation especially with learning entry level ASL. After beginning to learn ASL, learners who want to continue further study can do so without the support of the English captions.

Closing Remarks

The ASL learning webinar, *Signed Language for Everyone* serves the important goal of helping Martha's Vineyard become a sign language friendly community. The choice of the island is not accidental, as Martha's Vineyard once had a shared signing community. The interview data with 16 full-time island residents confirms that ASL is being introduced in an entry-level manner. There were also a number of comments and suggestions that the islanders made to improve the webinar. Dr. Cripps and his students were able to make appropriate changes. The webinar is now ready for linking to the Martha's Vineyard Chamber of Commerce's website.

Community-based research has been key to the achievements made with the ASL learning webinar. This social change centers on giving hearing island residents an opportunity to learn ASL and develop basic

communication capacities for deaf visitors who come to the island and for a small number that live on the island. Dr. Cripps of Clemson University teaming with two full-time Martha's Vineyard residents and two Clemson students helped create this focus of action. The fact that Martha's Vineyard made such progress in becoming a sign language friendly community is to be commended. This webinar was recognized as a need to fulfill the need for hearing islanders learning entry level ASL.

There are multiple projects currently being undertaken through a collaborative working relationship between Clemson University and Martha's Vineyard. The research team will do its best in addressing the need for social change concerning deaf people and Martha's Vineyard that reflects Universal Design (UD principles) for inclusion. By all accounts, the creation of an ASL learning webinar with input from the Martha's Vineyard community constitutes a timely and insightful research contribution to the sign language proliferation endeavor.

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