Soc 401 Final- Dr. Rice

**Covering up true feelings:**

**Studying deaf culture using Dramaturgy.**

Erving Goffman is major contributor to Sociological Interactionism. His method, Dramaturgy looked at “social interaction as a series of small plays, or dramas” (Delaney 2005:123). Dramaturgy allows individuals to become actors, and share their live, their experiences, their interaction through performances to any audience at any given setting, this is known as the *front stage*; your outer appearance. What is left for *backstage*, are your true feelings on ‘self’. Here lie your values, beliefs, and thoughts on these *plays* that reflect your situation and experiences. These thoughts or the dialogue you have when you separate yourself from a situation consumes your back stage; what you are not always willing to share right away. The type of conversation that you have in privacy; which can be in your own head, out loud when you are alone, or when you are round close friends who know who you are and are able to speak freely around them with your situation, experiences, ideas, etc.

In Dramaturgy, it is very common for individuals to mock others and partake in this idea of “impression management in order to give and sustain a particular definition the situation,” (Delaney 2005:123). It is used to protect your audience from your *true* reaction to unexpected events during a social performance. For myself, my impression management was to smile and encourage, just like the teachers did at my practicum location.

I choose to do my volunteering for this term at Desert Hills Elementary school working specifically with the Deaf Education program with the grades that range from 3rd to 5th grade. There are five children in this class specifically. Lou Ann is in the 3rd grade, and she is hard of hearing. Her mother is from Puerto Rico and only speaks Spanish. So she is learning English, ASL, and Spanish all at the same time in order to communicate with her mother as well as her peers. Divine and Gus are both in the 4th grade. Divine is hard of hearing, and was actually taken out of Ms. Karen’s Deaf Ed last year because she was learning at the pace and level of her hearing peers. Change in medication brought along other issues dealing with attention span and focusing skills. Fluxuation in medication is what brings Divine back into the classroom this year. Gus, on the other hand is deaf and also dyslexic. His major struggle is with reading and comprehension, but he is very in tune with people and how they are feeling. Isabel, or Izzy, is hard of hearing and is in the 5th grade. Izzy can read, write, and understand English it just takes a little bit longer for her to processes information. Joseph is in the 5th grade, and is a character! Like Gus, he is completely deaf. They both have to basically memorize everything that they learn because he cannot rely on hearing sounds and lip movement to understand how to put words together and their meanings. Joseph also has problems that occur at home, that one would have to know in order to understand the actions of Joseph, but even after you do that, you might not completely understand—but we all love him anyway.

I initially began volunteering here with the intent to fulfill the practicum requirements for class and also to help improve my ASL skills that I was also learning this semester. What I gained was so much more than learning signs, and piecing theories to examples at the elementary school. I now have an understanding of the Deaf culture, and what it obstacles you face being a Deaf Ed teacher working here in Las Cruces. In this paper, I plan to explore the positionality about what it means to be a Deaf Ed teacher, using front stage and backstage techniques of Goffman’s dramaturgy method addressing the Deaf culture, parent involvement, and educational techniques. Then I will address how dramaturgy empowers and dis-empowers the community involved in this practicum.

The Deaf culture and the **way** they participate in communication are not like the hearing world. Yes, they form sentences and “talk” like other cultures, but in initial conversation they seem to be more intimate. The Deaf culture is a very cohesive group of people. Because their community is pretty small, they value the idea of becoming very familiar with each other and getting personal as soon as you meet. When a hearing person meets a deaf person specific information is shared. They first ask you what your name is, (2) then they want to know if you are hearing or Deaf, (3) where you are from (4) where you are learning ASL, (5) the name of your teacher, and (6) why I am learning ASL.

As soon as I walked into the mobile my first day of volunteering, I did not even take two steps in the door before Gus began to ask me who I was. Knowing that this is valued in their culture, I signed all my information. In return he told me his, signed ‘nice to meet you’, and continued on with his work. He asked me the questions that he needed answered for his own understanding of who I was and what I was there to do.

The problem is, is that to a hearing person some information requested could be too personal to talk about after meeting a person for the first time. For example, Gus walked up to me and showed me a picture of this girl. He then started to explain that the girl in the picture was his sister. He started signing very fast after that, and I was only able to pick up a few signs. Ms. Karen then explained that that was his sister and that she had ran away two days ago from home with one of her friends. I guess the blank look on my face was enough of a response that he put the picture back in his desk, grab his math book and we started working on his math together. This is the front stage that dramaturgy addresses. Inside, I was completely shocked. Gus was just sharing some information to me, information that others would not be elated to share. To some, family issues are not discussed with others, especially not strangers. Personally, family is the most valued institution. It is something that you want to protect because who you are is based off of your experiences with your family, and society will judge you and your family if you do not behave according to societies standards. No one willing wants to admit that their family structures has some cracks in their foundations, because we are so caught up with what others think about us, but the Deaf don’t see “sharing” this information as a bad thing. Gus, may not understand the seriousness of the information that he shared, and because no one sat him down and told him everything about the situation we might not truly understand. He deems the information necessary to share with others because it is new news about him and his family, information that the Deaf share with each other.

This familiarity that the community develops does not stop at basic introduction. When they walk in late to a class or a meeting, they do not come in as quietly as possible and sit down at the first available seat like the hearing does. They are expected to walk in apologize for being late and to give the reason, the people in the room accept the explanation and move on with what they were doing. When Izzy was late to school, she came in with her mom and they told us that she started her period that morning that was why she was late to class, she then sat down and jumped right into doing her work. Personally, if that was me, I would have just walked in and sat down because that is what I as a hearing person is used to doing. Especially if it was something personal like that, I would not be making that announcement to my teacher, and my peers; I would be embarrassed. Menstrual Cycles are natural for women, but it is information that does not have to be announced. We, as women, do everything we can to not bring unnecessary attention to our period, but Izzy was just explaining her tardiness, something that is a part of their culture. The parents of our kids and their involvement add another element for our classroom; an element of surprise.

I learned in my ASL class that 90% of deaf children do not have deaf parents. So going into this practicum I was thinking that I would see this in the classroom that I was working with, which was true. Joseph is the only child in our classroom that has one parent that is deaf. One day, Joseph was walking around with 2 hearing aids in his ear, which was new to me because I was told he cannot hear. I confirmed with Ms. Karen that he was deaf and asked about the hearing aids and she just started shaking her head. She shared with me that Joseph’s father and his paternal grandparents thought it was a good idea for him to wear his hearing aids because they claim that he knows 60 words and that if he is in another room they can call out his name and he will eventually come out of the room and join them where they are. Ms. Karen has worked with him for 5 years and she has never heard him uttered an English word, only a “wilder beast cry” as they call it in the class. But the grandparents insist that Ms. Karen sign less to Joseph, and mouth words to him to improve his English; which actually can be disrespectful in the Deaf culture to mouth every word that you are signing.

Now the mother who is hearing wants Ms. Karen to sign to him. She believes not signing to Joseph, would hurt him academically and socially. If his grandparents take him out and tell people to only speak to him, he could be looked at as “stupid” or “slow” and as a result, hearing people will stop trying to communicate with him. She is absolutely right, not signing to Joseph would have a negative impact on him academically, socially, and emotionally. We see how our society views and treats people who cannot speak or understand English. If we stop signing to him, what will he end up doing? How will he better himself and contribute to society? I asked about what the grandparent’s methods were for the Dad and his English. She said that they did not teach their son sign language until he was an adult, so that he could “fit in,” but Ms. Karen told me that his English-speaking skills are pretty non-existent, but he can lip-read. So what that shows me is that they want Joseph to be just like his dad, who actually has some personal issues that he is dealing with. And a lot of josephs actions are in direct response with what he sees from his dad. His impulse to act out desires in classroom, him not understanding the concept of giving people space, etc all stem from him not understanding. So cutting off communication to him, would not be a positive thing to do.

The thoughts that consume my backstage about family involvement in these kids lives are very strongly opinionated. This comes from my own passion about families, so how they impact these kids frustrates me. What gets under my skin, is why do the parents think that they should have the upper hand when it comes to their Deaf child, or that they know what is best for the child when none of them has ever thought or took the time to learn sign language. Some have learned the absolute minimum in order to learn sign, but the basic minimum is not efficient. As a parent, why would one not jump on the opportunity to do the simple thing of being able to communicate with their own children? What gives them the right to parent, or to tell the teacher what they should or shouldn’t learn in the classroom when they are not trying to communicate with their children about their needs and wants? That is a problem for me, and it is reasons like this that make believe that some people just shouldn’t be parents.

Discussing my feelings about family to Ms. Karen she brought up a good question, questioning how not being able to communicate with their Deaf children not the same as neglect? She says that the state says that as long as they come to school fed, clothed, and cleaned then the parents are doing their job. As an adult, I do believe that in no way that is enough. Children, period, need more than that! Since these kids are not getting what they need at home, A lot of pressure is put on the education system to not only teach these kids, but shape them into the people they are going to be in the future, since this is the only place they can really get that communication.

Unlike the sections above, I am going to start this part with my backstage first. I walked into class with an open mind, but I fell victim into wondering what the class did for the children and I was looking for someone to blame. Why are these kids still in this classroom? Why haven’t they done well enough in this classroom that they could go out and be in class with children their respective age and grade? What was not clicking? Is it Ms. Simes and Ms. Lynn’s fault they have not left? Their parents? The schools? What I learned by working with the Ms. Karen, Ms. Lynn and the kids is that “everyday is a new day for these kids.” They could go from getting 100% on their spelling one day than the next day not know one sign for their vocab. But you have to understand that these kids only communicate when they are at the school. So when you go home, you lose that information. It is the same with children during summer break. They go home and have three months of no communication unless they go to summer school. And the hearing world wonders why most Deaf kids graduate high school with only a seventh grade reading and comprehension level.

Gus is in the fourth grade and is still doing second grade math. When I ask why he does so well on his math skills homework than he does in the classroom, Ms. Simes tells me it is because sometimes his family members do his homework. So when He comes into class with that smile on his face to turn in his homework, knowing that he did not do it, what can she say to him? Does she start signing to him that she knows he didn’t do his work and it is clear by the handwriting, and make him feel bad? Does she call him out in front of his peers? “Staying positive and positive reinforcement” is what these Special Education teachers are taught to handle these children. So they are always portraying a front stage appearance in the classroom. She cannot tell this little boy that he will not be independent in his future if his parents continue to do his work; instead all she can do is have him practice his skills, everyday and even though he may struggle on easy addition problems, everyday he does show improvement, which is all the confirmation that she needs that validates what she is doing in the classroom.

The school has adopted a program that they expect every grade level to complete. It includes reading and comprehension, math, and English material. Well half of that doesn’t work for these kids, especially if the children are behind their respective grade. So Ms. Karen took it into her own hands and picked up home school material for one of the students. It explains more than the other learning program that the school adopted and has a lot more repetitious practice problems that helps Izzy to retain the information. What is great is that she is starting to really understand the material that the rest of her grade is being taught, so ultimately she is improving which is great for her since she is going to middle school. Ms. Karen also ties in the schools choice of material when their lessons coincide, so it is not like the student is not completely out of the loop. It is just an extra resource, I think. But, if the school found out that this was the material Ms. Karen was using, she could get into trouble, but that doesn’t stop Ms. Karen from using it. She says, “if they want they can fire me! I actually want them to succeed, so if that is what works, then that is what we are going to stick to.” And personally I agree. We bring our children to school so that they can learn something, so that one day they can be a functioning citizen in society. If no one is getting hurt, and they are actually learning the material that they need to, who cares how they learn it. Ms. Karen and Ms. Lynn agree, so they are currently looking for home school material that is going to work for the younger kids in the class. As a Teacher, She sees what stuff works for her students. So she says forget the stuff that is supposed to be for everyone and puts it off to the side. “If these kids are going to walk out of my class at the end of the day, they are going to learn something,” Ms. Karen says to justify her actions.

One Thursday in class, we were doing Math. So they start off with a time math test of 100 addition problems, then they move on to math programs that have been individually designed for each student, because they all are at different levels of math. At the time, Gus and Divine were sitting at the table. Divine did a problem, than erased her “work” once she got the answer. Ms. Karen told her that she needed to make sure she continued to show her work because they would want to see that on the State Test. I became curious about the test, because I wondered how they were going to take this test and be compared to their peers if some of them were not even working on their grade level in some subjects. Ms. Karen started explaining how Divine and Izzy will take the test at the end of the year with accommodations such as longer time, but Gus and Joseph do not take the test. I was confused at this point. I know those tests have to do with funding, but if you do not know that information how do you expect to graduate and be successful in the world if you cannot do basic level stuff. She told me that the boys would receive certificates of completion, not a diploma, at graduation. Since they have worked hard, they get recognized for that, but since they cannot test their level of understanding, they do not get a diploma.

Backstage that hurt my heart! Ultimately the purpose of getting an education is so that one day these children will be able to flourish in our society, but what society doesn’t take into account is these Deaf children’s positionality. They don’t pity the fact that these kids go home for the summer and experience no communication—I mean it’s the same when they leave the school on a daily basis. The larger society does not understand that every day is a new day for these children, and it is not far. Not to the children, or the teachers. “Change within a system is very slow and marginal,” (Delaney 2005:79) especial for kids with a disability.

When she said that, I looked at these boys—who were smiling back at me—and felt bad for them. As a society, we put such emphasis on graduating and diplomas in order to succeed. And these boys work hard in these classes and they don’t get that diploma at the end of it. Yes, they can go out and get jobs, but it is not fair that they don’t receive this same opportunity as us hearing do in larger society, and have to accept their reality.

We are in the process of creating a classroom book that gives the audience a chance to know the Deaf Ed group at Desert Hills Elementary. One portion of the book is a poem about yourself and you have to mention what you love, what you need, what you fear, and what you want to do. In my poem, I put I want to study cultures, and I thought this would be a good way to see what the kids wanted to do with their lives. One of the students said that he wanted to become a fireman. When I read this it made me think of some of the problems that he faces in the classroom that he is going to have to improve in order to reach this goal. I understand that *who we want to become* changes as we grow up and experience life, but he has to get the basic to be able to succeed in any career force. For example, reading and writing are the key things for him. He is completely deaf, so he does not know how to read lips and put sounds to words like the hard of hearing, so his reality—if no one in his work force knows ASL—is to learn how to communicate his point through reading and writing. If he does not get this, he will not be able to support himself the way that one would want to in the society that we live in.

All those that work with Gus know that when he grows up he is going to be a wonderful person, and one of the best dads that he could be. He will be able to provide for his family, but it might not be on the same income level or with the same financial freedom as his peers. As much as you don’t want to create someone’s life for them, this has some truth to it. Yes, he will be able to work, but he won’t be viewed as competitive as his peers without that diploma. While reading his paper, I looked at him and he showed me the sign for *Fireman*; with the biggest smile on his face he pointed to himself. I smiled back signed cool, then walked away as my mind wondered about all these other things that could be obstacles he has to face to get there. That moves us into how working collaboratively with Desert Hills and Ms. Karen’s Deaf Ed group empowers and dis-empowers Dramaturgy.

Symbolic interactionism empowered the community:being more sensitive to peoples situations, allows me to be more patient, language and how to communicate, allows you to conceal your beliefs and your emotion and allows you to do your job.

Disempowering because by concealing these thoughts we are ultimately leading these children blind. Saying that they are doing good, when in reality they are far behind? That moves us into how Dramaturgy empowers and disempowers working collaboratively with Desert Hills and Ms. Karen’s Deaf Ed group.

By acknowledging your inner and outer appearance when you get around people can have its positive affects especially with a group of children who are deaf and read your facial expressions since they cannot hear what you are actually saying. It can empower the community on many levels. It allows some to be more sensitive to other peoples situations. Knowing that I wear my emotions on my face, it really made me more conscious on my facial expression. The Deaf culture is very different from the hearing culture but that does not mean that I need to treat the Deaf community the same. What I mean by this is, because they do things differently who Am I to judge what they are doing as wrong, because it is different from me. B not automatically reacting, I am able to take a deep breathe my self and truly think about the situation and the best way to handle it instead of just reacting. This helps me make sure that I am truly trying to understand someone. Dramaturgy and working with the Deaf Ed kids helped me to be more patient. There were times that I would just want to tell the kids the answer. But if I did that then they wouldn’t be learning and they could be thinking that language and how to communicate, allows you to conceal your beliefs and your emotion and allows you to do your job.