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# Q & A WITH RECIPIENT OF GOVERNOR GENERAL'S ACADEMIC GOLD MEDAL

Photo credit: Shuzana Niessen



(L-R) President and Vice Chancellor Dr. Vianne Timmons and Dr. Joanne Weber.

Dr. Joanne Weber was the recipient of the Spring 2019 Governor General's Academic Gold Medal for outstanding academic achievement by a graduate student. Weber completed a Ph.D. in 4½ years while also working full-time for the Regina Public School Board as the only deaf teacher of deaf students in the Province. Dr. Weber's dissertation is titled, "Becoming Deaf in the Posthuman Era: Posthumanism, Arts-Based Research and Deaf Education."

**Abstract summary:** In her dissertation, Weber explores posthumanism as a possible paradigm shift for deaf education, which is presently mired in binarized thinking concerning language choices. Posthumanist onto-epistemology proposes a radical shift from anthropocentrism to a posthumanism that emphasizes multiple and shifting relationships between animals, plants, humans, and the earth. Here, posthumanism proposes that human activity not be defined according to a

binarized lens often used by many governing bodies, policy developers, medical specialists, and educators but include the material realities as expressed by animal, plant, and mineral entities. Weber investigates the implications of posthumanism within the context of deaf education where language choices (American Sign Language and spoken English) are presented as binary opposites to deaf children and youth, parents and educators.

## Q & A with Dr. Weber

### ***Tell us about your journey to here? About your becoming?***

I am a profoundly deaf teacher who, since birth, has struggled to participate in the hearing world. I developed the ability to speak, read and write in the dominant language of our culture (English) and I became fluent in American Sign Language (ASL). At the age of 25, I started to learn sign language and to participate in one of the most marginalized

communities on this planet, the Deaf community. Despite the immediate rejection, dismissals, and scorn from other professionals in deaf education, I resisted the grand narrative associated with disability, that is, to overcome disability and to take one's place in the dominant culture. I also objected to the audist narrative that promotes the belief that the hearing world is the only world that exists and that one must acquire spoken language, English print literacy, and behaviours that approximate those of hearing people to be considered worthy of belonging. My initial attempts to overcome this binary between being hearing and being deaf began with becoming an advocate for the Deaf community, hoping to raise the profile and promote the rich and vibrant language, culture, behaviours, and traditions authored by Deaf people and their communities throughout the world. In doing so, I became exhausted, disillusioned, and despairing of the lack of progress in my concerted efforts alongside the Deaf advocates who dedicated their entire lives to improving the quality of education for those who could not acquire oral language skills or become proficient in English print literacy due to the lack of access to language either through the insufficient auditory information provided by modern technology such as cochlear implants, FM systems, and hearing aids or due to incomplete exposure to ASL during early childhood.

The continued failure to improve the quality of education for deaf children and youth drove me into the Ph.D. program. I could

not understand why no one was listening, particularly those who held the power to make changes. I could not understand, despite my concerted efforts to educate others in the education field, why progress was miniscule. I went into the Ph.D. program inwardly screaming and kicking as I was experiencing massive burnout and desperately wanted to leave my teaching practice. Yet, I was haunted by my own failure to teach, to thrive, and to bring about transformational change. I wondered, was there something I had not yet considered?

With the support of my supervisor, Dr. Fatima Pirbhai Illich, I entered an underworld journey in which I confronted my own complicity in the oppression of the deaf children and youth whom I thought I was serving. I had to confront my own deficit thinking about the students whom I taught and how I had marginalized them all in the name of doing "good things." I began to examine the degree to which I had cooperated with other oppressors (who are hearing) and how I had elevated my status at the expense of my students. The journey was painful and strangely liberating. I am still in the process of examining ways in which I am complicit. In doing so, I am increasingly letting go of my own need for power, control, status, and approval. In my journey of descent, I am beginning to see things that I have never seen before. The world is now numinous, indeed, "there is the dearest freshness deep down things" (Hopkins, "God's Grandeur," 1877) where I see deaf children and youth as having abilities, skills, intelligence and knowledges

initially suppressed by my participation in perpetuating the epistemic violences that buttress the education system and its ableist and audist narratives.

### ***How did the process of researching and writing your dissertation transform you?***

I considered the process of researching and writing as a way to restore my sanity and a very expensive therapeutic process. I was not wanting to develop another career. I just wanted to find out why I was going nowhere. I evaluated theories for their potential to change my world and the worlds inhabited by my students. I wanted change, not mere description of what was happening to my students. The field of deaf education is saturated with research on what is wrong with deaf people. Therefore I felt a tremendous urgency. I was getting older, the students coming into my program were more bereft of language than previous students I had taught, and the systems that serve deaf students seemed to be mired in inertia. I didn't want to waste any more time pretending to be something I was not, nor did I want to preserve a system that was essentially destroying my students. Therefore, I decided to engage in arts-based research because I intuitively knew it would be very hard for me to do. I had to learn how to express myself in an entirely different way. I had always been an accomplished writer in the creative writing and academic arenas. I had acquired a slick way with words in being able to write pieces that were powerful and convincing to myself and others. On the other hand, I was an untrained artist and I had to undergo

the embarrassment I felt about showing my work to other people, especially talented and gifted artists. In doing so, I was able to approximate somewhat, the depression, anxiety and fear about expressing oneself through an inadequate grasp of the means of available communication experienced by my students. I set for myself the task of creating an art piece in response to research texts and academic scholars. In doing so, I stumbled upon an inner world that I knew had existed through my own creative writing, but was much more readily accessible, wondrous, and strange. The processes of making art enabled me to see and feel on a visceral level the damage I had inflicted upon my students through perpetuating epistemic violences upheld by institutions that claimed to serve them. Then I turned to how art could be used to lead my students from the void imposed by language deprivation which had been inflicted upon them, to acquiring a voice that could express what they actually saw and felt. In doing so, I stumbled across hidden and fleeting intelligences that surfaced while they negotiated the material, social, cultural and linguistic spaces afforded by art making. I learned to leverage these intelligences and the students responded in joy, gratitude and increased effort. Therefore, the *Deaf Crows Collective* was born, out of the collaborations between myself, the students, the artists in residence (funded by the Saskatchewan Arts Board), Chrystene Ells and Berny Hi. We produced two plays, "Deaf Crows," and "Apple Time." The Collective also produced "Nay's Story," in which a young Burmese

man recalls his harrowing escape into the jungle with his family and his eventual arrival in Canada. An arts installation, "The Deaf Forest" was displayed at the Dunlop Gallery in the fall of 2017 and again at the Deaf Culture Centre in Toronto.

### ***Were there difficulties in achieving your research objectives? How did you overcome the obstacles?***

In exploring my own journey, and using arts-based interventions with my students, my dissertation literally and quickly wrote itself. It was easy to identify posthumanism as the most productive theory that sought not to describe or represent what was happening to the students but to focus on the performativity that occurs in intra-actions with material, social, cultural worlds inhabited by humans, animals, earth and machine. For the first time, I felt whole. My existence was no longer dominated by binaries that were forcing splits on so many levels within myself and in the worlds in which I inhabit. Upon accessing my own inner worlds, using posthumanism, arts-based research methodologies and exploring a traditionally polarized field such as deaf education, it became easy to marry theory and practice. I came to understand that theory is everything. If the thinking isn't right, then nothing else is. The traditional gap between theory and practice is because the theories we have up to now, don't fully explain what is going on. We need a new operating system or more literally a new brain. Posthumanism and arts-based research enabled me to download that new operating system.

### ***What do you hope your research might accomplish in the field of education?***

Deaf education is highly polarized due to conflicting views on how to education deaf children and youth. While the current field yields many successes, it generates many failures due to its finalizing suppositions. My hope is to collapse the binaries, using a number of multidisciplinary strategies gleaned from intercultural pedagogy, critical pedagogy, arts-based interventions, insights from English as an Additional Language (EAL) pedagogy, deaf anthropology, deaf studies, sign language linguistics, policy studies, and posthumanism. We can no longer view deafness as a medical problem to be cured. Deaf people are complex in similar ways to hearing people, an idea that has come when we consider them to be human beings negotiating multiple and complex worlds with the resources that are allotted to them, rather than being in need of simple cures such as hearing aids, cochlear implants, and other hearing technologies.

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