

Deaf Culture Question of the Week - October 13-17, 2008

NTID has two dining halls called the **Dining Commons** (which is closer to the LBJ/NTID Academic Building) and **Grace Watson Dining Hall** which is the main dining facility on the campus of RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology). Do you know the traditional "sign names" given to these two dining facilities?

Scroll down for the answer.

Answer: Traditionally NTID students have used the sign "**eat**" or "**D-at-the-mouth**" (like the sign **eat**) followed by a "**C-grasping-at-the-throat-with-tongue-protruding**" for Dining Commons. This sign insinuating that you will choke on the food served there.

For the Grace Watson Dining Hall students have traditionally signed "**G-down-the-mouth-and-throat**" (like taking food in to the body) and "**W-back-out-again**" (like throwing up). Don't think I need to explain the meaning implied by this sign name.

Pretty creative heh? College students always dislike the cafeteria food they get served in colleges. Nothing new with that. These "sign names" show the creative properties of American Sign Language. The traditional dislike for institutional food finds expression creatively in the name signs used by students for these two food service buildings.

ASL Linguistics

These two names signs are what are called by Sam Supalla (1992) Descriptive Name Signs (DNS); that is, they describe a feature, behavior or have implied meaning related to the person or thing they name. Many times new ASL learners "give themselves" or "are given" descriptive name signs based on some physical or behavioral characteristic of their personalities. (Of course Deaf Community members should be the only people creating or giving names signs.) Generally speaking, I don't think name signs should even be awarded to "learners of ASL" by their teachers (Deaf or Hearing) until the student may ultimately become a member of the Deaf Community. But I know the practice is quite common in ASL classes.

The other category of names signs are Arbitrary Name Signs (ANS). These are name signs usually based on a person's name (first name or first and last name) and are neutral in meaning. That is, they don't have implied meaning other than to designate the person's given name through the letters of the ASL alphabet. Sam Supalla (1992) has written a book studying and explaining ANS and DNS name signs and the rules that govern their creation and use. You will find the reference in the attached article which is excerpted from a new ASL curriculum that myself and a team of teachers from NTID and NE University are working on. This new ASL curriculum, *ASL at Work*, is projected to be published within the next year by Dawn Sign Press.