

Deaf Culture Question of the Week – October 1 – 5, 2012
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You come upon two deaf people having a conversation. Your path is blocked. You should:

- a. Stop and stare with an awkward grin on your face.
- b. Bend down as you walk to avoid blocking their view of each other.
- c. Turn around and find another way to get to your destination.
- d. Walk through avoiding eye contact with either person.

Answer “d” – Walk through avoiding eye contact with either person. This may seem awkward and impolite to most persons new to Deaf culture. After all walking between two people having a conversation seems rude and disruptive. In hearing culture surely it is. In Deaf culture however it is accepted and a practical solution that is actually the least disruptive and therefore most courteous solution.

Deaf people use their vision to receive information when engaged in a signed conversation. They also need sufficient space to accommodate the movements of their arms when producing signs. In a hallway, for example, two people engaged in signed conversation may stand across from one another in the hall. Of course in a very busy hall they will often move or position themselves so that people using the hall will not be walking through their fields of vision as they talk. They may also notice a person coming and one person might step closer to allow the approaching person to walk behind. When you can walk around or behind two people talking in sign language you should. But in a situation when you can't walk around or behind, it is perfectly acceptable to walk between the two people.

As in any culture there are all sorts of rules that govern how people use their language to communicate with other members of the cultural group. This is only one of many rules for negotiating and organizing space between and around persons using sign language. In future DCQW I'll challenge readers with more of these subtle communication behaviors.

Note that

Deaf Culture Questions of the Week are archived at: <http://www.wsd.wa.gov>