

Introduction to DEAF¹ space

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What is space...

For a long time, geographers talked about distance and space as something that could be measured. They would say things like "Your cleaning cupboard is 20 feet away and very small, the pub is 2 miles away and very much bigger..." and made assumptions based on this information; for example: "you should know your cleaning cupboard better than the pub".

However, they soon realised that this was not the case. If you are, for example, one of those people (students) who never opens their cleaning cupboard but who lives in the pub, then you will already know this is true. Although you can 'measure' space in terms of feet and inches... and give relationships between them in terms of how big or small they are, and how far apart they are, that doesn't mean that we 'understand' space that way.

Humans don't understand spaces by reference to their scientific measurement. Instead, we understand them based on the way that we use them.

One example of this is to compare the difference between driving to an unknown destination with driving home from work on autopilot. There's no logical reason that one piece of road is any different from any other, except that you know one of them better because you use it more.

So, geographers stopped simply measuring spaces and instead started to look at the way people use spaces. They discovered that *spaces are actually all about possibilities*. We use spaces in different ways because they allow us to do different things (go somewhere, relax, get fit, talk to others, learn etc.) and so *spaces are very political and powerful things*. Our lives are a constant battle to create spaces that will

¹ The difference between DEAF, Deaf and deaf is too complex to cover here... However, you can pretty much read it as

- 'deaf' means 'can't hear',
- 'DEAF' means 'culturally DEAF and recognised as such by other DEAF people',
- 'Deaf' means 'like DEAF, but defined in terms that the hearing world understands'.

In terms of DEAF space, the difference is one of intent versus ambivalence. 'DEAF' is a term that emerged within DEAF space and that describes DEAF space whether it's contested by the hearing world or not... it has the advantage that it is theoretically non-contestatory, but the disadvantage that it's fluid and weak in terms of political intent. 'Deaf', on the other hand, has emerged from attempts to justify DEAF space in the eyes of the hearing world. It is politically strong but does rather fall into the trap of justifying itself by reference to the thing it contests. I will write something more on this soon.

allow us to do the things we want, while other people are trying to also control our spaces to get us to do the things they want us to do.

See how this works if:

1. The council stops us travelling down a road we use everyday so that they can dig it up and install a telephone line.
2. Our boss finds we spent too much time talking at work and makes us move desks into another office.
3. The pub we go to regularly to relax changes hands and the new owner puts sports televisions all around the walls.
4. A cake shop opens up on our walk to work on the same day that we decide to go on a diet.

So, geographers now look at questions of space like this:

1. How do people imagine the spaces they live in?
2. How do governments and authorities control people's use of space?
3. How to people create the spaces they need to do the things they want?
4. What happens when different uses of space collide?

What is DEAF space...

Why is this discussion of space relevant to DEAF people?

Well, remember that spaces are less to do with measurement and more to do with possibility. Now ask one question... What is the world set-up to allow?

The answer, really, is that it's set up to allow (to make possible) hearing cultures.

How does this work?

Well, remember the argument that it's not 'measurable' space that is important, it's space as its 'used' that is important.

Now, imagine two villages, one that only has hearing people living in it, and one that has only deaf people. How will each of those villages develop over time as the people in them use space? Imagine, for example, what their communicative habits might be, what that might do to their houses, or how it might guide their technology as it develops, or how they might conduct their politics (or even their scams, practical jokes, family times, education etc...)

Do you see how producing a 'space' is not simply 'making a box'. Even the box will take on a different shape because of the space that's produced within it. Ben Bahan suggests that the hearing village might be full of walls and doors and telephones, and that the deaf village might be full of windows and open views and lighting...

This is the heart of a 'DEAF' space, a space produced by deaf people that is just as valid as a hearing-world space, but built around possibilities as they are experienced from within a visually oriented body.

Now, that's fine if you have two separate villages... but of course the world isn't set up like that. DEAF people live, work, eat, sleep, shop and relax in the same world as hearing people... So, what does DEAF space look like there?

Well... within a world that has been predominantly produced as a 'hearing' space, DEAF space can't be like that village. For Deaf people to be able to communicate freely in the same way, they have to create visual sign language spaces. DEAF space appears as DEAF people come together and develop the sign languages that then allow them to author a visually mediated culture. Perhaps in its simplest form, DEAF space within a predominantly hearing world is like a series of interlaced bubbles of long-term and ongoing visual communication that allow them to be DEAF rather than simply 'deaf': schools for deaf children, DEAF clubs, DEAF families and that create the contexts in which deaf people 'become DEAF.

But is this really DEAF space as it could be?

Even as you read this, perhaps you're already feeling a tension between the 'little' DEAF space bubbles that are produced within a predominantly hearing world, and the 'big' DEAF space that I've suggested might exist within that DEAF village. If the space produced by the people in that DEAF village is just as valid as the one produced in the hearing village, then why should we assume that DEAF space starts as 'bubbles' in a wider hearing world... shouldn't we imagine it in its glorious potential... as equal to hearing-produced space with the same right to author the shape and politics and beliefs of the world?

Well, yes... but of course DEAF people are in a minority... so you have to deal with that situation as well...

However, it's here that (I believe at least) that DEAF space really demonstrates its power as a theory and compliments (or rises to contain perhaps) theories of Deafhood and Deaf citizenship...

There are two ways to address the situation of DEAF people within the hearing world... either you can start with the basic idea that DEAF space is inherently something that starts small and develops into something big in a context where it is 'free from oppression'. Through this lens, DEAF people are best served by reinforcing its boundaries, validating its knowledges and justifying its difference in ways that the hearing world can accept.

The other way, however, is to start with the basic assumption that the hearing world can't understand DEAF space, because the fundamental feature of DEAF space is that it's potentially *just as big as hearing space itself*. Rather than attempt to decolonise DEAF space by engaging with hearing world arguments, therefore, its

focus is on persuading the hearing world to look beyond its own boundaries and acknowledge that there are realities out there that have their own, entirely different, entirely valid rules... and examine why it has so far failed to recognise them.

So rather than ask questions like 'How do we *prove* the validity of Deaf culture according to hearing-world theory?' or 'How do we gain recognition for Deaf language within the laws of hearing nations?' it suggests that these things will never be fully possible (ie. They will only ever lead to contestatory frameworks) unless DEAF space itself is acknowledged. Rather than aim to protect and validate what goes on in the 'little' DEAF space bubbles by reference to hearing knowledges, it adamantly asserts its right to carry out the same analytical critique of the hearing world, of its knowledges and structures and languages and beliefs, *from within DEAF space itself*.

"What would you do" it asks "If tens of thousands of years ago, the world had opted to sign instead of speak? What would your (our) world look like then? Who would then be disabled? What would communications technology look like? What would international relations look like in a world where everyone signs? What would politics look like...?"

DEAF space is contestatory... but not in the sense that it needs to contest hearing knowledges to survive... rather it is contestatory because it flips the understanding that the 'hearing world is all that there is' on its head and then demands that the hearing world justify why it has gone to such pains to ignore that possibility for so long...