

# ASL music video project helps deaf students learn online during COVID-19

Lynn Giesbrecht • Regina Leader-Post  
May 11, 2020



Joanne Weber, artistic director of the Deaf Crows Collective, left, and Michelle Grodecki, a teacher with the Winston Knoll Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program, use sign language to communicate in Regina on Friday, May 8, 2020. TROY FLEECE / Regina Leader-Post

While most students across the province have adapted to online learning, the transition has been harder for students who are deaf or hard of hearing.

At Winston Knoll Collegiate, the Deaf and Hard of Hearing Program's (DHH) 19 students typically have their classes taught in both English and American Sign Language (ASL) simultaneously. This accommodates students who already know ASL and those who are just learning it. Using a social learning model, their coursework revolves around projects and group work that encourages students to express themselves.

For many of those students, school is the one place they feel they can be who they are and have meaningful conversations with their peers.

"A lot of our students' only exposure to (ASL) is at school. When they go home they don't have a lot of exposure to sign, and if they do it's not really deep conversation," said

Michelle Grodecki, one of three teachers with the DHH program, along with Joanne Weber and Willow Bellisle.

When the COVID-19 pandemic forced schools across Saskatchewan to close and classes moved online, DHH students struggled to adapt to the new learning method.

Students began giving shorter answers to questions and not interacting in class discussions. Without being able to use a social learning model and without a safe space where students could communicate using ASL regularly, teachers noticed the students' language skills fading.

“When we went online due to coronavirus, that all fell apart because we were not in the same room anymore,” said Weber.

“We can see deterioration in our students because they're not communicating enough. They're not signing enough.”

DHH students were also feeling more isolated. The classroom provided them a space where they could ask questions and learn about world events in ASL.

For one student who joined the DHH program in Grade 9, Grodecki said the program gave her a chance to experience a whole new world of connections.

“It took her from this world where she felt so isolated to being able to have deep, profound discussions with her peers and with her teachers,” said Grodecki.

“She said the other day, ‘And now that I'm back at home that's all been ripped away from me again and I'm right back into isolation.’”

Together the teachers decided something needed to change. The idea of creating an ASL music video had been tossed around before as a potential final project. They decided to start the project earlier in the hopes of getting students engaged once again, and an upbeat version of Bill Withers' song Lean On Me was chosen.

The DHH students were thrilled at the idea of creating a music video.

Weber is also the artistic director of Deaf Crows Collective, a group for people who are deaf or hard of hearing that teaches theatre and performance while celebrating deaf culture and encouraging self-expression. Many DHH students are involved in the group.

By bringing in other members of Deaf Crows Collective, students combined lyric interpretation with performance and expression. All participants in the project worked together to break down the meaning of the song's lyrics and interpret it into ASL. They also learned about rhythm using a metronome with flashing lights.

Amber Galloway, a well-known sign language interpreter in the United States who specializes in music interpretation, joined one of their video classes to walk them through her interpreting process.

“That social modelling and social learning that we do so often in our classroom, we were able to bring that back into the online platform,” said Grodecki of the video project.

Since the project wrapped up, however, the teachers have been noticing students revert back to their shortened answers and lower engagement with their classes.

With the announcement on Thursday that Saskatchewan schools would remain closed for the rest of the school year, Weber said they are looking at doing another video project to continue giving their students hands-on, collaborative ways to learn. Deaf Crows Collective is also working on a separate film project to continue connecting its members.

Still, Grodecki is eager for the day her and her students can be back in the classroom together.

“They’re not getting the education they once had when we were in the classroom,” she said.

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**Note to readers:** We know the speed and volume of coronavirus-related news is overwhelming and a little frightening. To help with that, we have several reporters looking at different aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic and are gathering all our stories, especially as they relate to life in Regina and Saskatchewan, together on our website. All our coronavirus-related news can always be found here: [leaderpost.com/tag/coronavirus](https://leaderpost.com/tag/coronavirus).