Preparing interpreting students to be allies in the Deaf community

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Abstract

The profession of interpreting is directly linked to consumers who rely upon the linguistic skill, cultural competence, ethical conduct, and professional dispositions of qualified interpreters to provide them with equal access to information. The norms for a signed language interpreter's behavior that align with a standard of quality are of particular interest when contemplating how interpreters could be involved within the Deaf community. This paper addresses the ongoing discussion in the U.S. about (1) preparing signed language interpreters to share common goals and form alliances with the community, and (2) ethical perceptions of collaboration outside the interpreted event that do not violate the organizational code of conduct. Realizing that issues such as trust, clear role definition, ethical norms, and "maintaining professional relationships" (Australian Institute of Interpreters and Translators, 2012) have similarities across nations and their various codes of ethics, a perceived gap in the U.S. between professional interpreters and consumers is the catalyst for evaluating options that will close this gap.

Interpreter educators on an international and collaborative scale remain interested in identifying dispositions that are prevalent and even predictive of signed language interpreting performance (Bontempo *et al.* 2014). The term 'dispositions' refers to more than personality characteristics – it implies an interactive approach to interpreting that is respectful and cognizant of various worldviews

and lived realities of participants. An effort to cultivate trustworthy dispositions in interpreting students is occurring in interpreter education programs across the U.S. through a form of community engagement called 'service learning' (Shaw 2013). In fact, the Accreditation Standards published by the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE, 2014) (the accrediting body for undergraduate interpreting programs in the U.S.), specifically state that a program's curriculum must include "service-learning, community engagement/civic responsibility to stakeholder communities" (p. 8). The timely publication of CCIE standards that directly impact the education we provide student interpreters comes when many interpreters are reevaluating their roles as uninvolved message transmitters. At the higher education level, issues of oppression and power differentials might previously have been introduced to students as important points of knowledge, but synthesizing that information into action that supports the Deaf community's causes has been missing in many programs (Shaw 2013).

Service learning is not unique to higher education in the U.S., although its origin dates to back to the pedagogy of John Dewey in the 1930s (experiential learning) and establishment of Campus Compact in U.S. universities during the 1980s (Furco 2003). In the work of Iverson and Espenschied-Reilly on perceptions of international service learning (2010), the authors document how culture, social context, and learning tradition (specifically, in Ireland) affect implementation of service learning. They also elaborate on the permeation of community engagement in higher education programs in many parts of the world, where the practice is modified to fit the context in which it is used, particularly in "countries where language, culture, and geography differ more widely" (ibid.:.12).

1. Historical foundations of alliance in the U.S.

The idea of an alliance between Deaf consumers and interpreters continues to infiltrate a profession that traditionally advocated for professional distance and role definition as a conduit of information transfer (Dickinson/Turner 2008). A role with distinct, unmovable boundaries often was fueled by a belief that interpreters should not interact with the Deaf community outside the work environment (usually after linguistic competence is achieved). The downside of rigid role distinction that restricts interpreter-community alliance is the separation of interpreters from the community that welcomed them into its midst (especially non-native users of American Sign Language) and contributed to preparing them to become interpreters long before there were interpreter education programs. The community has a vested interest in interpreter quality, of course, and to this day, immersion in the Deaf community to acquire the prerequisite language skills for interpreting, wherever that may be, is imperative for second-language learners to transition to learning the interpreting process (Shaw *et al.* 2004).

When the U.S. government established interpreter education programs in the 1970s through federal grants, there began a slow but steady rift between academia and a community that had previously identified and prepared its own interpreters. The consequence of separating interpreter education and professional practice from the community is a noticeable depreciation in trust, and in

recent years, dialogue about the 'trust issue' has been the focus of research (Humphrey 2013). In an effort to address the trust factor within academic programs, interpreter educators in the U.S. are introducing forms of community engagement for their students that are non-exploitative, ethical, and collaborative with the community. Service learning (hereafter used interchangeably with community engagement) is the proposed remedy for reconnecting interpreting students and working interpreters to the Deaf community for the purpose of building trust and promoting community goals. This practice of becoming allies with the Deaf community, a topic now gaining momentum in the U.S. interpreting community (Brace 2012), potentially promotes an identity that can be accomplished without jeopardizing ethical standards.

2. Trust and responsibility

Demers (2005: 209) suggests that signed language interpreters must "maintain their professionalism at all times so as to merit the trust of those who depend upon them for competent and comfortable interpreting". Additionally, a guiding principle of the National Association of the Deaf-Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf Code of Professional Conduct (USA) is that "interpreters hold a position of trust in their role as linguistic and cultural facilitators of communication" (2005: 2). Trust and responsibility are fundamental elements in relationships between interpreters and Deaf community members that were more prevalent prior to institutionalizing interpreter education and professionalizing the field in the U.S. Traditionally, interpreters were trusted family members, but in recent years, we have evolved from cultural, social, experiential, and linguistic immersion in the Deaf community to a classroom that is sometimes far removed from the community. Prior to interpreting becoming an occupation:

> [...] members of the Community would determine for themselves whether and when someone possessed sufficient communicative competence and had also demonstrated sufficient trustworthiness that they would be asked to interpret/transliterate. (Cokely, 2005: 4)

The period between 1975 and 1990 was a transitional era in the U.S. during which well-meaning "professionals", who were learning to interpret as a prospective trade, replaced trusted family interpreters. As interpreting professionalized, interpreters increasingly became removed from the Deaf community (Sherwood 1987). Children with Deaf parents and other relatives were no longer the primary resources for interpreting services as learning shifted toward the external venues of colleges and universities. Monikowski and Peterson (2005) document that interpreter education evolved from cultural, social, experiential, and linguistic immersion in the Deaf community to a classroom far-removed from the community:

> Having been often ignored or maltreated by *professionals* throughout their history, one can understand how some deaf people were unhappy that many of these new interpreters were now too detached from the deaf community. (Moody 2011: 60)

Sherwood (1987: 16) documented her concern during this time about cultural outsiders taking on the role of interpreters:

> Trust is something that must be built and earned, not "installed". Without adequate cultural information and preparation Hearing interpreters' behavior was based solely in their native culture, the axioms of which are frequently contrary to many Deaf cultural norms. This resulted in a conflict that did not and does not foster a 'trusting' relationship. I believe that some of the 'fallout' of this phenomenon are just now, after two decades of struggle and conflict, becoming apparent [sic]. The new system of recruiting, training, and evaluating interpreters has created the 'profession' of interpreting. A parallel field development seems to have been the creation of an 'us-against-them' attitude, which represents the antithesis of trust.

The powerful element of trust is first and foremost related to confidentiality, and Sherwood evoked the following questions for interpreter educators: Could interpreters who had not been reared in the Deaf community and who were trained in the classroom possibly integrate Deaf culture norms such that they were indeed skilled with cross-cultural communication? Would they adhere to the values of the Deaf community and amply demonstrate that they could be trusted with private information? Interpreter educators continue to grapple with the best strategies for fostering intercultural competence and maintaining alliances in the Deaf community while instilling in students fundamental ethical boundaries. Trust was foundational in the early movement toward what could be termed *re-engagement* of interpreting students (and Interpreter Education Programs) in the American Deaf community. Trustworthiness and high standards of ethical behavior continue to be a priority as we teach our students how to establish reputations on which the Deaf community can rely. Uslaner and Brown (2005: 869) determine that while engagement can promote trust, an element of trust between entities that are somehow unequal must be present in order for engagement to be productive:

> Trust rests on a psychological foundation of optimism and control over one's environment. Where inequality is high, people will be less likely to believe that the future looks bright, and they will have even fewer reasons to believe that they are the masters of their own fate. Inequality leads to lower levels of trust and thus may also have an indirect effect on civic participation.

3. Re-enfranchising the community in interpreter education

In a dialogue about *re-enfranchising* Deaf people to their rightful place in interpreter education, there are certain assumptions that guide our efforts. The first assumption is that Deaf consumers will drive curriculum development and be the catalysts for improving interpreter education. The second assumption is that programs will be strengthened through mutual alliances, and students will receive a more comprehensive and functional education through collaborative learning than could be achieved in the classroom alone. A final assumption is that stable alliances will reflect the perspectives of Deaf people on what consti-

tutes a highly qualified, culturally competent interpreter. All these assumptions speak to the value of being an ally.

Trudy Suggs, a Deaf advocate and presenter of *Deaf Disempowerment and Today's Interpreter* (2012), emphasizes the importance of interpreters as allies in empowering Deaf people. She elaborates on the ways interpreters continue to exploit a community's language and culture through economic and situational disempowerment, however unintentional these actions (or inactions) might be. Suggs's stance on exploitation of the Deaf community directly relates to the discussion of re-enfranchising the rightful owners of language and culture to positions of leadership and equality within interpreter education. When preparing interpreters, educators can contribute to this effort by following examples that Suggs proposes for interpreters:

1. Refuse to control situations.
2. Defer to Deaf people.
3. Support Deaf people and Deaf-owned business.

Suggs is one of many outspoken advocates of the *alliance mentality* who views interpreters as valuable allies for the common goal of "mutual, full respect" (ibid.) Developing such a respect and 'recognizing the shared experiences as human beings' are central to alliances, but these goals cannot be achieved without interaction. If interpreters fall into the trap of *boundary bound* positions, they do not gain the experiences they need to contribute to a shared reality and understanding of the Deaf community's individual and collective goals.

Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005) conducted action research that gets to the crux of the matter regarding the potential for alliances between Interpreter Education Programs, students, and the Deaf community. When they asked Deaf consumers about the entry-to-practice competencies they expect of new interpreters, the responses confirmed the need for "personable, collegial and collaborative relationships with interpreters based on open communication, a contribution towards common goals, and mutual respect and understanding" (ibid.: 39). Furthermore, the participants in the Witter-Merithew and Johnson study described an ally as someone who:

> […] stands with deaf people in their fight for equality and access. The *crusader*, on the other hand, attempts to lead the fight as if it were their own [sic]. One is grounded in cultural competence, the other in paternalism and audism – a belief that deaf people do not know what is best for themselves and cannot take the lead in defining their direction as individuals or as a community. (ibid.: 40)

These voices from the Deaf community cause us to pause and seriously consider how our attempts at advocacy can result in audism and how our professional standards that address involvement of the Deaf community will reflect these perspectives. The message is clear: re-enfranchising the Deaf community compels us to be allies, not advocates or crusaders, and one way to prepare new interpreters is in the midst of their educational experience through community based learning.

Despite the merits of community based learning, there is a professional risk that students and interpreter educators assume when entering into alliances. Al-

though taking risk is positively associated with learning (Rubin 2002), we would be remiss without stopping for a moment to earnestly consider how to avoid taking unnecessary risks during community engagement, especially as new interpreters. The potential for damage to program-community or individual-community relationships is real, albeit unintentional. The danger is that good intentions to enthusiastically resolve issues or *meet needs* can fail to empower Deaf people and cause interpreters to slip into "dysconscious audism" (Gertz 2008: 219). Furthermore, Gertz delineates the negative consequences of dysconscious audism (DA):

1. DA disempowers Deaf people from becoming liberated.
2. DA disables Deaf people from expressing Deaf cultural pride.
3. DA intimidates Deaf people and limits their promotion of the Deaf perspective.
4. DA weakens Deaf people in the development of their Deaf identity (ibid.: 230-231).

The term *service learning* could be described best as *collaboration learning* or *alliance learning*, as its purpose is to build relational strength while honoring ethical boundaries between interpreters and the Deaf community. These terms allow us to accept the premises of service learning as a means of supporting the goals of the Deaf community more readily and possibly ease our transition to it as effective pedagogy. However, as long as we clearly distinguish it from community service and operationally define service learning as a mutual partnership between interpreters and the Deaf community, we can apply the most current research on its efficacy to interpreter education and incorporate the evidence into our planning for implementation. It is important to define service learning in terms of its value to personal and professional relationships because the way we discuss it impacts how students receive the message that this concept will become an important part of their approach to the Deaf community well into their careers.

4. Service learning as a contributor to building alliances

It is imperative that we distinguish service learning from community service as both activities have different goals. Monikowski and Peterson (2005: 194) refer to community service as a "false synonym" for service learning because the relationships formed through volunteering are quite different than those developed through mutual partnerships. Merely being in the presence of Deaf community members, participating in community events, observing other interpreters, providing pro bono interpreting, or participating in optional service projects are all examples of involvement that do not qualify as service learning. Likewise, Practicum, Internship, and Mentorship are constructive and essential forms of experiential learning when earning an academic degree, but they are not representative of the same service learning model that empowers the Deaf community and centers it within educational programs (Howard 2001). Community service and volunteerism certainly are meaningful and appropriate in their own rights, but they do not embody the philosophy of service learning, especially as it relates to interpreters and the Deaf community in interpreter education and post-gradua-

tion. These other forms of community involvement tend to be unilateral in that they focus on helping a recipient who is in need. This, in turn, implies there is a power differential between the giver and the receiver, which, of course, is an inappropriate dynamic for interpreters.

Additionally, service learning is not cultural or linguistic immersion, although it is undisputed that bicultural and bilingual mastery is invaluable for student success. In short, experiences that are designed to benefit the student or provide service without a mutually beneficial partnership do not qualify as service learning. On the contrary, and in the strictest sense of the term, service learning is a *joining of forces* between an interpreting program and the Deaf community that endorses the community's goals and provides support to its leaders in their efforts to achieve those goals. A review of the literature for a uniform, accepted definition of service learning reveals numerous suggested meanings without establishing one single definition for the term. In fact, "one of the greatest challenges in the study of service-learning is the absence of a common, universally accepted definition for the term" (Furco 2003: 13), and over a 10-year period in the U.S. during the 1980s and 1990s, more than 200 definitions of service learning were published (Jacoby and Associates 1996). This might be the reason some interpreter education programs believe they are incorporating service learning by mentoring students, requiring them to be involved with Deaf community events for language exposure, or encouraging them to volunteer in the community. If service learning is to become an integral part of interpreter education programs, we must avoid associating it with volunteering, observing, shadowing, or mentoring.

Budding interpreters who have yet to internalize a code of professional conduct will learn from service learning that it is possible to form community alliances and still be professional practitioners. They will achieve this understanding by the way educators frame service learning with an understanding that *meeting a need* is not fixing something that is broken. Rather, *need* represents a vacancy, gap, or opening and would be better defined as an *opportunity for action within the context of a partnership*. Therefore, *service* means collaborative action applied to the opportunity and does not refer to helping, which of course takes on the negative connotation that our profession diligently has tried to overcome. Monikowski and Peterson (2005: 195) define service learning as a "recursive phenomenon, wherein students learn the significance of membership in a community while reflecting on the importance of reciprocity and the symbiotic nature of learning and living". Taking all the caveats and distinctions about *service* and *need* into consideration, and distinguishing it from such closely-related concepts as community service, field experience, and volunteering, Shaw (2013: 8) defines service-learning as it specifically applies to interpreter education in the following way:

> Service-learning is a means of aligning students with the goals and values of the Deaf community through a reciprocal, respectful, and mutually rewarding partnership, resulting in progress toward Deaf community goals and enhanced learning of the responsibilities associated with alliances between future practitioners and the communities in which they work.

King (2004) reminds us that there are obvious negative repercussions of power exertion when there is a *server* and *one served*. Interpreters, interpreting students, and interpreter educators are urged to be extremely cautious during the implementation of service learning to avoid positioning themselves as *privileged servers* of *underprivileged recipients.* The interpreting profession has come a long way from the helper model of yesterday, and we have no intention of stepping back into an age when our roles were precariously ill-defined. We have defined service learning such that the *have and have not* power dichotomy is avoided.

5. Over-identification

In addition to avoiding a power dichotomy between interpreters and members of the Deaf community, *over-identification* carries a high price for interpreting students. *Over-identification* is a sort of boundary crossing that can have negative effects on students and their future work as interpreters. In an excerpt from Witter-Merithew and Johnson (2005: 38), the authors documented the following:

> A significant number of entering interpreters seemed to lack a strong sense of their own identity within the broader society, and they over-identify with the Deaf Community and deaf individuals. This over-identification is expressed in a number of different ways [...] Examples include: the interpreter over-asserts her- or himself into the community (functioning as an advocate versus an ally, speaking "for" deaf people, taking on jobs they are not ready for without seeking appropriate consultation or supervision in order to be "included"); the interpreter seeks the privilege membership usually restricted to deaf persons (attendance at "closed" events, leadership roles in deaf clubs and organizations, valuing possessing "insider" knowledge, access and familiarity); the interpreter lacks balance (the interpreter has "no life" outside of deafness-related events, or restricts their associations to only those within the Community); or the interpreter seeks frequent affirmation (lacks a sense of self or ability to monitor performance, seeks ongoing acceptance and validation from deaf people) [...] The implications of this over-identification reported by the interviewed deaf individuals is that they, and those they represent find it difficult to establish healthy boundaries and to establish clear expectations with many interpreters – be it in expressing dissatisfaction with the quality of service, choosing not to request a particular interpreter for an assignment, or asking for some adjustment in interpreter performance.

An example of over-identification might be an interpreting student who desires to promote Deaf community causes and innocently takes on a leadership role within a local Deaf-led organization. The student begins taking more and more control of the organization's activities, thinking this is helpful, without fully understanding how to empower others who are equally, if not more, capable. Another example would be assuming an advocacy role for a cause one thinks is vital to progress for the Deaf community, all the while assuming that he or she is the best one to speak for Deaf people. Over-identification is a phenomenon that probably is not indicative of a power-wielding attitude, but certainly warrants a caveat from educators about the results of a student's unconscious over-identification. Service-learning courses offer the perfect venue for introducing balance

and empowerment to partnerships, allowing students to practice appropriate involvement while they are still under the mentorship of their faculty members. Undoubtedly, educators recognize the importance of teaching students how to be involved in the Deaf community without exerting control. Given the changes over time in the social construction of our communities, the recurring trust dilemma permeates the discussion of service learning. Relationships, partnerships, and alliances all revolve around this focal point. Ultimately, service learning in interpreter education assists students in establishing trusting relationships in the community. From a sociological standpoint, students gain an understanding of their own *place* and close the widening rift between themselves as future practitioners and the Deaf community.

6. Coming to terms with *service* and *boundaries*

The emphasis on an equitable balance between *service* and *learning* is central to the concept of building reciprocal alliances. Each has a direct impact on the other such that when service and learning are combined, the value of both is increased, and both are transformed (Porter Honnet/Poulsen 1989). This may be all well and good in some disciplines, but interpreters are justifiably cautious when it comes to stretching boundaries into the Deaf community that might be misconstrued as improper. The discussion of boundaries for interpreters is generated from the professionalization process that Cokely (2005) describes and Grbić (2010) addresses in her recent work on interpreter role and identity. Grbić cautions that classification systems (e.g. setting up cultural or class categories that divide people) only serve to construct "mental fences" (ibid.: 114) and unnecessarily compartmentalize our interpreting practice. Classifying in this way exacerbates any distance issues between professionals and recipients of professional services. In fact, Grbić suggests that the closer we come to our definition of *professional*, the more distinct our boundaries become, which "constitutes an inherent means of excluding others" (ibid.: 109). Of particular interest to the dilemma of drawing boundaries and purposely detaching from the Deaf community, is the fact that boundaries are not static and can be re-drawn. We are not limited by the current situation, and categorical identities can be reconstructed as a profession evolves. Using a bridge metaphor and applying Kegan's (1994) idea of building a bridge of consciousness from one level of maturation to the next (as from adolescence to adulthood), it is possible to envision how our own personal thought patterns can adjust to a new (or old) paradigm of Deaf community relationships that release us from the boundaries of rigid categories.

7. Conclusion

The topics presented here are intended to shed light on a pervasive perception that the Deaf community in the U.S. does not drive interpreter education to the extent it once did, resulting in interpreters who view themselves as having dis-

tinct and static boundaries that isolate them from community interests. One alternative for preparing interpreting students to be culturally competent practitioners who are engaged with the local Deaf community is service learning, a pedagogy that is progressing within U.S. interpreter education programs. Perhaps there are other ways to accomplish what service learning is doing. Empirical studies on the efficacy of service learning in interpreter education could lead to improvements in how we guide students into a deeper understanding of their future roles as trustworthy allies with the Deaf community.

Acknowledgement

Parts of this manuscript are adapted with permission from the author's publication, *Service Learning in Interpreter Education: Strategies for Extending Student Involvement in the Deaf Community* (2013). Gallaudet University Press.

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