

Perspectives from the Trenches: An Open Forum on Postsecondary Educational Interpreting

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Abstract

Since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the number of Deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) individuals enrolling in or working at mainstream postsecondary institutions and the need for qualified interpreters on the postsecondary level have increased. While many in postsecondary education recognize this and speak of needing the best interpreters in postsecondary settings, many still struggle with ensuring that this happens. This paper will focus on how the various individuals involved in providing services to D/HH students, faculty, and staff can form partnerships in various settings on postsecondary campuses.



Introduction

To ensure that successful access to communication is achieved for Deaf and hard of hearing (D/HH) students at postsecondary institutions, a variety of individuals are typically involved. The various styles of teaching, learning, and working, the type and depth of subject matter covered, and the postsecondary institutional culture are all factors that influence the postsecondary educational interpreting process. Unfortunately, educational interpreting, in general, has long been viewed as the stepchild of the interpreting profession.

Postsecondary educational interpreting is no different and suffers from a lack of communication among those involved in providing services for postsecondary D/HH students. This often results in a reduction in the quality of interpreting services provided to D/HH students, difficulties in retaining qualified interpreters, and a lack of commitment to the field of postsecondary educational interpreting on the part of interpreters themselves. These problems can often be mitigated by providing a clearer picture to interpreters, consumers, administrators, and educators of what successful interpreting on the postsecondary level entails, namely the forging of partnerships among those involved in providing and receiving support services. Opportunities for open and honest communication among those involved in providing services to D/HH postsecondary students and for gathering information on how successful partnerships can be achieved are, however, few and far between. This paper is intended to share some ideas on successful partnerships and to present the results of a discussion among interpreters and administrators on their respective concerns about and solutions to common problems found on college and university campuses that serve D/HH students.

Partnerships

Partnerships have occurred traditionally between only two individuals (e.g., the student and the interpreter working together to invent signs for subject-specific vocabulary for which there is no established ASL equivalent, or

the support services coordinator working with the instructors to identify reasonable accommodations for the students taking their courses. Partnerships can involve several individuals, including those other than the main participants (e.g., parents, academic advisors, non-instructional staff). Regardless of the number of participants, it is always best to maintain a student-centered approach when establishing partnerships. While there are many situations in postsecondary settings where partnerships occur, this paper focuses on those in the classroom, outside of the classroom, and in employment settings.

In the Classroom

A partnership in the classroom involves those times when direct instruction takes place between instructors and students. This includes labs and field trips, as well as traditional classroom lectures. The main participants in most classroom partnerships are the D/HH student, the instructor, the interpreter, the support services coordinator, and other students.

Often opportunities to establish partnerships are missed due to misperceptions about the roles and responsibilities of the potential participants. Some examples of highly effective, yet underutilized, in-class partnerships are:

- The interpreter working with the instructor to determine how to interpret in a way that supports the instructor's lesson objectives. Interpreters should consult resources on interpreting in educational settings and its relationship to pedagogy prior to consulting with the instructor. One excellent resource for such information is [Interpreting in the Classroom: Providing Accessibility or Creating New Barriers?](#) (Winston, 1993). Obviously, the more information the interpreter has about what will be interpreted and why it is presented in a particular manner, the better.
- Comparing course notes with the content that was actually delivered to ensure accuracy and clarity. Typically, a student simply checks what he or she recalls of the instruction against the notes taken in class. However, various types of partnerships could occur in this situation. The D/HH student could work directly with the notetaker. The student, the interpreter, and the notetaker could work together to relate the interpreter's sign choices with subject-specific vocabulary and concepts. Finally, the instructor could be involved to check the accuracy of the notes and to clarify subject-specific vocabulary and concepts.

The more involvement or input D/HH students have in the services are getting, the better. Yet while seeking input from students, it is always wise to remember that their purpose in pursuing postsecondary education is just that – to get an education, not to deal with the burden of coordinating their own services.

Outside the Classroom

A partnership outside the classroom involves those times that don't involve interaction between the instructor and the class as a whole, but still impact the educational experience of the student (e.g., office hours, pre-term planning, staff/faculty in-services, tutoring sessions, academic advising, extracurricular activities, etc.). These types of partnerships often involve more individuals than those occurring within the classroom. While the increased number of potential partnerships may seem confusing at first, the educational experience of the D/HH student can only be enhanced by a coordinated effort of all involved. The opportunities to be creative in finding ways to enhance the educational experience of the D/HH student increases with the number of potential partnerships. The likelihood of

involvement by individuals other than the main participants of in-classroom partnerships (e.g., parents, resource providers, student clubs and organizations) is greater in partnerships outside the classroom.

As with partnerships in the classroom, many overlook the opportunities for establishing partnerships outside the classroom that often exist. Some examples of these include the following:

- The support services coordinator may provide in-service training for an institution's interpreting staff through the assistance of one of the Regional Interpreter Training Project grant programs or Postsecondary Education Programs Network (PEPNet) regional centers. Administrators other than the support services coordinator are often involved by providing the support and resources necessary to institute such training.
- There may be opportunities for those involved in providing or receiving support services to give their input in how the institution administers services. Some institutions around the country are doing so by establishing committees that include students, instructors, and interpreters, among others, to ensure compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA).

Employment

This is an area that is becoming increasingly important as employment barriers to D/HH professionals are removed from postsecondary institutions. We feel it is important to address this in this paper since those who are responsible for providing services to students are often called upon to provide services to D/HH staff and faculty members. It can feel like a juggling act trying to make sure everyone's needs are met, and often involves individuals and departments that interpreters and coordinators have not had to deal with in the past. Support services coordinators may feel they cannot take their "more qualified" interpreters out of their D/HH students' classes to meet the needs of D/HH staff and faculty. Often, program coordinators may feel that the classroom has higher priority than the working environment. These different dynamics also apply to student employment situations, such as work-study and internships.

Once D/HH staff or faculty members are hired, the office of Human Resources is automatically responsible for ensuring that the college meets their needs in regard to accessibility. One of many misconceptions on campuses today is that the coordinator is legally responsible for meeting the staff and faculty's needs in addition to meeting students' needs. While the office of Human Resources is legally responsible to make sure the needs of D/HH staff/faculty are met, the coordinator may *provide* and *conduct* services. For example, the office of Human Resources is the responsible party in providing accessible equipment, such as TTY/TDDs and flashing lights for the phone, fire alarms, and emergency alarms. On the other hand, the coordinator is responsible for providing access to communication for D/HH staff and faculty members in their work-related meetings or activities.

As previously mentioned, some colleges have established ADA committees. The purpose of the ADA committee is to work closely with the office of Human Resources and service providers to ensure that the college is following, maintaining, and upgrading accessibility for all students, staff, and faculty with disabilities on the campus. This can prove to be an excellent opportunity for partnership, in that the ADA committee usually consists of representatives from a variety of departments, such as the support service providers, college administrators, students with disabilities, interpreters, instructors, people with disabilities from the community, and the college's ADA officers.

The D/HH staff and faculty members are responsible for informing their administrators of their needs. Administrators can be a great source of support. Another issue that may arise is competition among the D/HH staff and faculty for the "best" interpreters for their classrooms and workplaces. D/HH staff and faculty members should have an equal opportunity to access the same information and be able to advance in a mainstreamed work environment, if

possible. Some interpreters may not be accustomed to working with D/HH staff and faculty members having advanced degrees and more sophisticated vocabulary than the average student, creating a frustrating situation. This is an ideal opportunity to develop a partnership to allow interpreters to become familiar with the type of work the D/HH staff and faculty members do and the vocabulary used in their work environments. It is often mutually beneficial to provide the same interpreter for D/HH staff and faculty members. This creates the opportunity for the interpreters to become accustomed to their signing style, the type of work they do, and the type of work their co-workers do. It also may provide additional insights into the political climate and organizational structure of the college in general. One solution may be to create an interpreter position specifically for D/HH staff and faculty members.

Focus Groups

At the 1998 PEPNet conference, 65 individuals participated in an open forum in which the concept of establishing partnerships to provide quality interpreting services at postsecondary institutions was discussed. These individuals were approximately evenly divided between interpreters and administrators. The latter group included both support service coordinators and those in other types of administrative positions. Each group discussed and listed their concerns and some solutions to common problems with providing interpreting services at postsecondary institutions. While other concerns and solutions were discussed, each group was asked to come to a consensus on which concerns they felt were greatest and which solutions they felt would best address common problems faced by institutions of higher education.

Due to time constraints, neither group was able to discuss what they felt others should know about their role nor their actual successes and failures in establishing partnerships at their own institutions. This is an area of further investigation and much needed open dialogue.

Concerns

During this session, the interpreters listed three issues of primary concern:

- Finding qualified and skilled interpreters;
- Improving the educational background of the interpreter; and
- Factors related to the role of the interpreter, such as the interpreters' code of ethics and the institution's own guidelines set for interpreters.

The administrators named four main concerns:

- Finding qualified, skilled, and available interpreters;
- Retaining qualified and skilled interpreters;
- Funding of services; and
- Serving under-prepared students.

Solutions

The interpreters came up with two solutions to common problems with providing interpreting services at postsecondary institutions:

- Educate staff/faculty on the interpreter's role; and
- Educate staff/faculty on ADA issues.

The administrators identified with four solutions:

- Gather more data, information, and evaluation tools on student readiness and how that relates to providing appropriate services;
- Continue a dialogue among all participants in partnerships;
- Centralize funding for services; and
- Network with others in similar positions at other institutions.

Conclusion

Given the variety of teaching, learning, and work styles and the uniqueness of each postsecondary institution's organizational culture, coming up with workable and effective partnerships can require some innovation and knowledge of how to navigate within an institution. It is hoped that through open dialogue among all current and prospective participants in partnerships we can continue to refine and enhance services to D/HH students at the ever-increasing number of postsecondary institutions they attend.



References

Winston, E., & Jones, B. (Producers). (1993). Interpreting in the classroom: Providing accessibility or creating new barriers? [Videotape and notebook]. (Available from Regional Interpreter Training Project at Johnson County Community College, Overland Park, KS).