# Soliciting and Utilizing Interpreter Feedback in Postsecondary Student Services

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Abstract

This paper defines feedback by its relation to growth and change. Ways of responding to feedback include acknowledgment, review, planning, action and rest. Traditional and non-traditional strategies for soliciting and utilizing interpreter feedback are illustrated with real-life examples. Steps for creating feedback tools are also presented, as well as ethical, philosophical and practical considerations.

Personal, professional and programmatic development cannot occur without feedback. Yet for many postsecondary interpreters or student service providers, current methods for soliciting feedback may not be gathering the information that is really needed for effective service delivery. This paper will define feedback through its relation to growth and change and will include theoretical and practical considerations for designing more effective feedback tools, especially in relation to postsecondary interpreting programs.

## Defining and Understanding Feedback: A Cycle

What is feedback? The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines it as a "response especially to one in authority about an activity or policy" (1989, p.277). Yet feedback is really much more than that. Feedback can encourage the status quo, lead to changes in a program, and empower consumers. It can be appreciated, ignored, celebrated and dreaded. Everyone intuitively knows what feedback is, but a complete definition is elusive.

One way to understand feedback is through its relation to change. Figure One shows a cycle of change and feedback, as it applies to individuals, small groups, departments, or any working unit. Movement within the chart happens along the bold lines with continuous movement between Acknowledgment, Review, Planning, Action and Rest. Movement may involve long-term circling around one part of the cycle and then rapid change through three other sections; there is never a set pattern, and there are no timelines. Brief acknowledgment of feedback may take a few seconds, or feedback may trigger a system-wide review which requires years to complete. There are four ways to categorize our responses to feedback: Acknowledgment, Review, Action, and Planning.

***Acknowledgment*** is the most simplistic response and usually does not involve a great deal of energy or effort. Acknowledgment may be a basic "thank you" or a simple acknowledgment of the feedback itself (e.g. "We received your response to our survey"). It may be delegating someone else to handle the feedback or a complete lack of response under the implicit belief that someone else will follow up. Acknowledgment recognizes that feedback has occurred but does not make an effort to respond in any significant way.

***Review*** is an evaluation or analysis of whatever triggered the feedback. This may involve examining the "big picture" versus details of a program or policy. It might be an evaluation or study. Another way to review is to examine short- or long-term trends, to see whether changes have already occurred. For individuals, "review" may incorporate mentoring or other professional development opportunities, providing a way to review skills, ethics, education, etc.

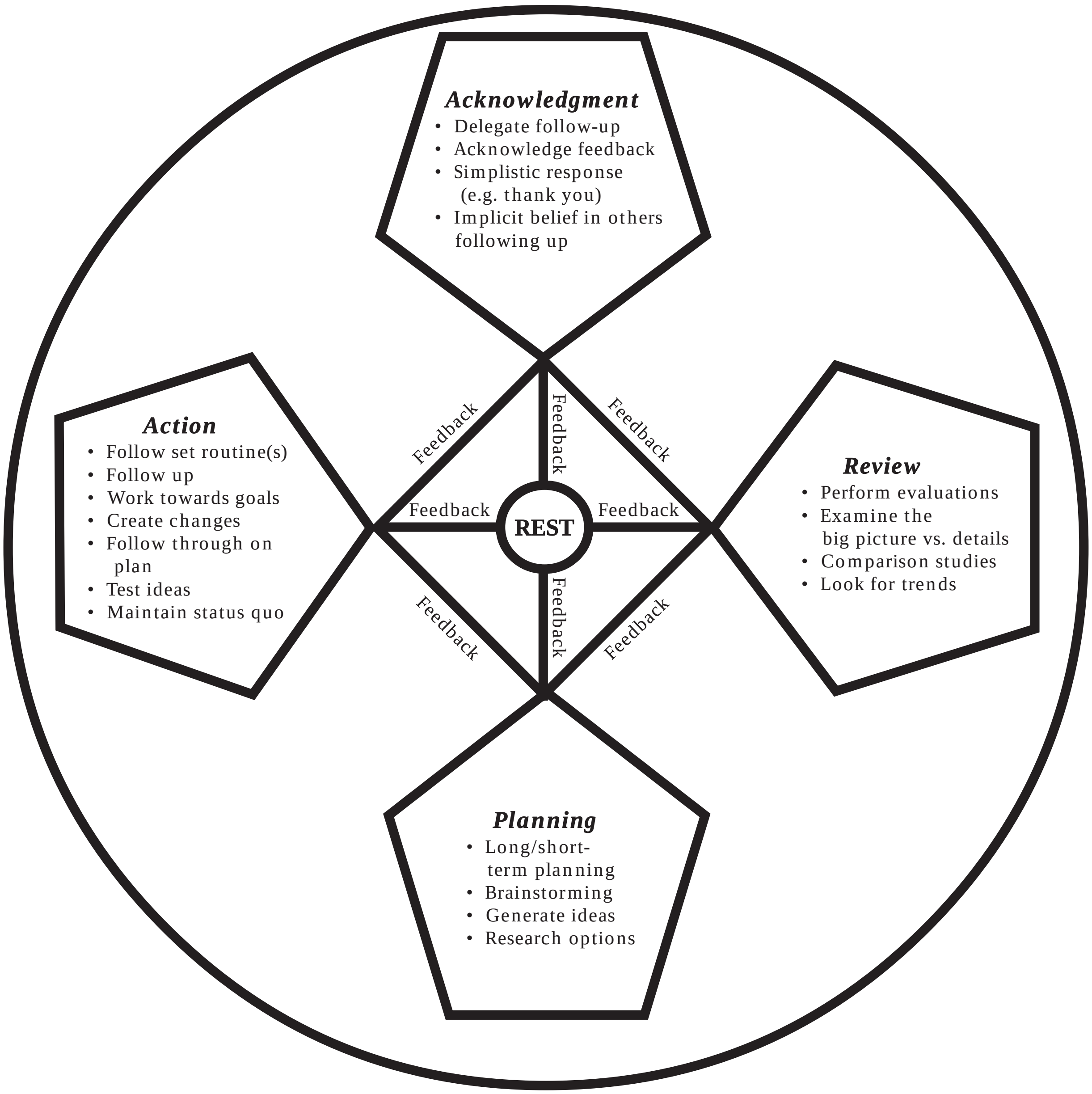
***Planning*** is a third response to feedback and may be short-term or long-term. Planning helps groups find and choose options for follow-up in response to feedback (but does not necessarily lead to any action itself). Planning also includes brain-

Figure 1

## *A Cycle of Change and Feedback*

*Working with Feedback*:

- Individuals and groups can be anywhere on the cycle at any time. There is no set pattern.
- Feedback (informal or formal) may happen at any time.
- There is no time frame for any of these cycles.
- More power means more access to various parts of the cycle
- This cycle applies to each level of organizations (individual, departmental, systemic, societal, etc.
- Change (for better or worse) happens when movement happens within the cycle. Disconnecting from the cycle is to literally pull "out of the loop."



storming, generating ideas and researching options. Individuals may use journaling, career counseling, performance reviews and goal-setting, whereas groups may use retreats, inservices, or other strategic planning methods.

***Action*** is when decisions of some kind are made and actions are taken. Action may lead to change, movement towards goals or the testing of ideas. It could create changes or follow-up. It is important to remember that maintaining the status quo is also an action and a response to feedback. Moving ahead or keeping things the same are both conscious choices.

The center of the figure is a circle labeled ***Rest***. Constant feedback and/or change may lead to burn-out or low morale. To rest is to remain in the cycle of change and growth but to acknowledge that a break of some kind is needed. Rest may be on an individual level (e.g. taking a walk during lunch or a much-needed vacation) or on a group level (e.g. having a retreat, doing something "fun," putting a hold on a project). People do not "pull out of the loop" unless they disconnect entirely from change and growth, leaving the cycle altogether by isolating themselves or actually leaving their job. Higher education needs dedicated and energized people; only people who take care of themselves will be able to continue making much-needed contributions.

In this way, the cycle of change and feedback may be a theoretical tool, but it is also a practical one. The more power a person has, the more access they will have to various aspects of the cycle; consciously understanding responses to feedback can ultimately empower those who are giving the feedback as well as those receiving it. For example, if interpreters are only "allowed" access to planning, but administrators never allow action, that can ultimately create disillusionment or frustration. If students are allowed any participation in the cycle, the feedback and follow-up may be more accurate and far more enthusiastic than if they are only allowed to fill out a form and never see their contribution or the "big picture" of an interpreting program. Feedback itself can become a response to programming but also a deliberate tool for change and growth.

## Designing Feedback Tools

At the PEPNet Conference, participants were asked to discuss current methods for soliciting feedback about interpreters. All schools represented were relying heavily on a "Student Feedback Form" in one form or another. Yet there are many other potential sources of information which may be just as useful, if not better.

When designing feedback tools, the basic who, what, why, when, where and how questions may be helpful. Who is working with interpreters? What are they saying, doing, experiencing? Why would they have useful feedback? When and where could they offer feedback? How could they offer it (what is the best method to get their opinion)? Designing feedback tools in a deliberate way may ultimately help bring a team together and align the visions of consumers, interpreters, and administrators.

Some ethical and philosophical issues may arise when an individual or department is soliciting feedback. In-house confidentiality policies and the RID Code of Ethics must all be considered so the privacy of students and staff are protected. Staff and interpreters must also consider any power differentials in soliciting feedback: Will the feedback be mandatory? Is it the student's responsibility to provide this specific kind of feedback to interpreters? Will students be given information about any follow-up to the feedback or changes made to the program? Also consider how conflicts will be handled if feedback leads to disagreement or a grievance: is there a grievance policy, could interpreters' jobs be in jeopardy if negative feedback comes forward, or will the privacy of students be protected if they give feedback to administrators? Considering ethics and philosophy before and during the development of feedback tools can help develop some agreement about how feedback will be handled.

Of course, every postsecondary interpreting unit has the experience of trying to solicit feedback and being met with a resounding silence. Theories, models and philosophies are only helpful if they are also practical. Staff need to consider their own resources of money, time, and staff. If a department has few resources, then elaborate feedback tools will be difficult to use. Also, consider the variety of students in most postsecondary settings, because the motivation for providing feedback may vary considerably. Freshmen may want something social; where, for example, groups of deaf students can work together and get free pizza. Commuter students may appreciate a postcard or web-based evaluation form that can be completed quickly at home. The students themselves may not only vary in motivation, but also in their ability to provide feedback of any kind. An eighteen year old freshman will have a very different perspective than a 50-year old commuter student or a deaf faculty member. Keeping their perspectives in mind will help interpreting staff develop a more versatile and useful feedback tool.

## Theory Meets Real Life:
## Practical Strategies

Below are some steps for implementing effective feedback tools that solicit feedback and also utilize it effectively. Some of these methods are more traditional (e.g. interpreter evaluation forms), and some are more "non-traditional" (e.g. focus groups). This information may be used by individual interpreters or staff members or by departments.

When creating a feedback tool or dealing with feedback that has already been given, here are a few helpful steps based on "The Spiral Model" by the Doris Marshall Institute (Bradley, Fiorello and Smith, 1999):

1. *State what is happening* (the situation or the issue that has been brought forward) or the information needed.
2. *What are some perspectives on this?* Consider administrators, interpreters, students, and past students. Is the "big picture" available?
3. *What is missing?* Consider what other information or details would be helpful and who might be able to provide it. Consider other resources as well, such as other colleges, PEPNet, community interpreter referral agencies, or other on-campus departments.
4. *Brainstorm about possible short and long-term goals*. What can realistically be accomplished in one month? A year? Five years?
5. *Select priorities and create a plan for soliciting the information* that includes a timeline and reflection or evaluation components (i.e. ways to measure success or know when goals have been achieved and ways for people to give opinions about the process).
6. *Create a plan for utilizing collected information*. How will the results be shared? Who will have access to the information? Which policies or programs may be affected by this information?
7. *Begin implementing the plan*.

For example, most interpreter feedback forms evaluate interpreter skills and ethics, while providing information about the interpreting program (i.e. policies and procedures) and student preferences. Figure Two lists some other ways to solicit the same information. Some of these may be more effective than a simple interpreter evaluation form; others may complement the evaluation form and provide more detailed information. Notice that students are not always the best people to provide a specific kind of feedback; interpreting staff, deaf employees, alumni, and community members may provide a new and important point of view. Figure Two is a model of how any feedback tool can be used in a variety of ways and how important it is to understand the exact information that needs to be collected.

After collecting the feedback, it is important to utilize it in some way. It may be used to make policy or program changes, or it may become part of a report that is disseminated formally or informally. Other options are to form work groups around an important issue, create a display board for students, add the information to a web site, or design some programming for students or interpreters. Using feedback effectively not only strengthens a program, but it also encourages further feedback by showing respect and purpose for the opinions offered.

When this paper was presented at PEPNet, I shared a video made by the University of Minnesota for the 1999 Postsecondary Interpreting Network (PIN) conference (Van Nostrand and Harbour, 1999). The video contains clips from interviews with postsecondary students, alumni, and even deaf children who discuss their dreams for college. Some of the opinions contradict each other, some of them are very personal, and some have broader applications; a few students are humorous, and are few are serious or even angry. The video, however, caused some interpreters at the University of Minnesota to see their job in a different light or to appreciate the changes that

Figure Two: Using an Interpreter Evaluation Form to Create Other Options for Soliciting Feedback.

Below are the four major topics usually addressed on an interpreter feedback form. Under these categories are listed a variety of ideas for soliciting similar feedback.

**Skills Assessment**

- Perform one-to-one observation of working interpreters by supervisors
- Encourage peer mentoring among interpreters
- Develop self-assessment tools for interpreters to monitor their own performance
- Create interpreter "portfolios" that document interpreters personal and professional accomplishments
- Solicit feedback from non-student consumers (e.g. faculty, alumni, community members)

**Ethics Assessment**

- Establish regular "case consults" where interpreters have an opportunity to discuss difficult ethical situations
- Create case studies illustrating various professional dilemmas and practice with ethical problem-solving
- Plan retreats or inservices focusing on ethics, where interpreters have an opportunity to discuss difficult situations and offer ideas

**Feedback about Policies and Programs**

- Ask interpreters to evaluate their supervisor and/or programming
- Hire an external program evaluator
- Collect historical data about the interpreting program (past vs. present)
- Create an advisory board that includes interpreters and students

**Information about Individual Student Preferences**

- Conduct one-to-one interviews with each student, asking for feedback and preferences
- Create student focus groups
- Develop different feedback tools for different consumers (e.g. deaf staff and faculty, undergraduates, graduate students, commuter students)
- Set up an electronic listserv and encourage discussion on-line about preferences and suggestions for working with college interpreters
- Plan fall "interpreter orientations" with incoming deaf students to learn about their preferences and expectations for college interpreters

have been made at the University over the past few decades. It also led to a more general appreciation for the diversity of deaf students in higher education. Until we started interviewing students on videotape, we had never fully appreciated how useful one-to-one interviews could be and how much the students wanted to share their ideas.

This is what feedback is really about: giving everyone an opportunity to be heard and developing ways to make services more effective. Combining models and theories with real-life experiences can lead to change on individual, departmental, or campus-wide levels. In this way, soliciting and utilizing feedback becomes an important part of service provision and a powerful tool for postsecondary student services.

## References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