

Exploring the Efficiency of an Online Bridge Between Working Interpreters, Student Interpreters, and the Deaf Community

Need for student and working interpreters to discuss interpreting issues

There is much consensus among working interpreters, Deaf community members, interpreter educators and interpreting students that many recent graduates of interpreting programs need additional training after graduation (Dean & Pollard, 2001; Humphrey & Alcorn, 1995; Roberts, 1994; Roy, 2000; Seal, 1998; Smith, 2000; Stewart & Kluwin; Taylor, 2001; West & Whitney, 2000; Witter-Merithew, 1996). Interpreted situations present professional and ethical dilemmas for which novice interpreters are not well-prepared. They need opportunities to explore these issues in a safe environment where they have access to not only their peers, but to others who offer a perspective that may provide more insight than they would think of independently.

Even working interpreters confront dilemmas that pose a challenge. The opportunity to discuss interpreting issues in a safe environment could provide substantial benefit to working interpreters as well as to consumers of interpreting services, because professional discussions of hypothetical issues will better prepare interpreters for situations that may arise at some point during their careers.

Ambiguity and ethics

Deaf and hard of hearing people are not all the same, neither are professional interpreters. In discussions of ethics, extreme cases of clear violations are less helpful to student interpreters than ambiguous cases. Ambiguity in itself indicates that there is more than one possible answer. A dilemma occurs when any possible choice could have

a negative impact on one or more parties involved in an interpreted interaction. When different people react to a hypothetical situation, each may think that a particular response is the most appropriate. When a group of people united by a common interest, such as gaining a better understanding of professional ethics and professional behavior, pose the justification and rationale for their beliefs, each group member has an opportunity to grow both personally and professionally. This expansion of knowledge will result in not only interpreters who make better professional and ethical decisions, but in consumers of interpreting who are better educated about the interpreting process.

Why does this concern Deaf and hard of hearing people?

Educated consumers who can justify reasons for requesting a particular approach to a situation can work with interpreters to brainstorm for the best way to resolve a dilemma, rather than leaving the decision making to the interpreter alone. If everyone in an interaction takes responsibility for making sure communication is clear, then everyone is empowered. Better decisions are reached when they are not made off the cuff and when they take into account multiple perspectives and potential consequences.

Deaf and hard of hearing people are not often included in the training of interpreters, so where are their voices heard? They are often heard by the interpreter who comes to an assignment after the one that caused stress to a consumer of interpreting services. Their stories are shared with other Deaf and hard of hearing people, or with interpreters who are viewed as deserving of this insider knowledge. The interpreter who might have made a choice that caused dissonance may never even be aware of the repercussions of that choice. If they are not aware of the consequences of a choice as

seen from multiple perspectives, and if they are not given an opportunity to see alternate choices, professional growth may either occur slowly or completely stagnate.

Tapped In as a venue for building an online community of learners

As I considered these realities, I wondered how it would be possible for Deaf and hard of hearing people, working interpreters, and student interpreters to discuss issues related to interpreting. I have seen listservs and discussion boards on interpreting issues, but very few Deaf and hard of hearing people participated in these online communities. Through a doctoral class on Advanced Technologies in Education with Dr. Jim Levin, I discovered Tapped In. It is an online environment devoted to building online communities for people interested in education. Since it is a public venue and it is free to join, I decided to see what would happen if I invited people to join a discussion about issues related to interpreting.

I began by posting two dilemmas that had been discussed in my Fieldwork interpreting class, and I provided a link to an article by Dean and Pollard that poses a framework for analyzing ethical and professional situations faced by interpreters. I also felt it was important to emphasize that all communication in Tapped In is public and that participation implies consent to the use of all posts for educational purposes. Since involvement in this discussion would require the user to have computer access and Internet skills, I composed an email (Appendix A) inviting a small group of people composed of Deaf and hard of hearing people, interpreter educators, and working interpreters to test pilot the environment and give me feedback about how easy or difficult it was for them to navigate in and around Tapped In.

Feedback regarding navigation around the Tapped In environment

Almost all of the feedback I received was positive (Figure 1). Two people said it took a little time to figure out how to navigate, and then once they found my “office,” it was really easy. Both of the people who said it was not that easy at first have been regular discussion participants.

User category	Feedback regarding ease of using Tapped In
Deaf community member & ASL teacher	Looks interesting. Better icons and lay-out than [WebCT]. Still took me a while to navigate around the site in the beginning, but managed to figure out how to post replies.
Interpreting student	I thought that this was very easy to navigate around and once you get to your office you can save it as a favorite and then every time you "log on" just go to your favorite and click on your name. I am excited.
Interpreter educator	I was able to access your office space and find it very easy to maneuver. I use a similar Blackboard system with the students in our interpreting program here. Almost exactly the same without the nice looking office furniture. I like the idea that an "outsider" can participate. Our Blackboard system is only accessible to the students in our class unless we specially enroll others.

Figure 1: Feedback regarding first time navigation of Tapped In

Invitation to a wider audience

Next I asked my Fieldwork students to check out the discussion, and I invited participants of the San Diego County Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (SDCRID) to join the discussion and/or to give me feedback about the Tapped In venue. At the same time, the Conference of Interpreter Trainers was having a discussion on their listserv about how members wanted to communicate. Some members felt that the email format was too cumbersome and made it difficult to read a discussion thread. Others felt that if a discussion was posted on a discussion board, it would be too easy to forget to check the board on a regular basis. I sent out an email about the project telling them that in Tapped

In, each user can set their own preferences which allow for either email notification or participation via the Web, and I invited them to take a look.

Discussion content

I have been extremely impressed with the quality and content of discussions in Tapped In. The topics that have been discussed are:

- Interpreting issues that raise the hairs on the back of your neck
- On the spot interpreting requests
- The chatting student
- When should an intern interpret
- Deaf compensation
- Implications of interpreters in educational settings

Within these topics, issues of language and literacy, bilingual education, Deaf culture, oppression, the impact of interpreter choice on the lives of Deaf people, legislation, educational practice, and empowerment have been discussed. References have been provided for those who wish to follow up on a particular topic. Deaf people have shared about how the decisions we make might personally affect their lives. Interpreting students have asked questions that they might never feel are appropriate, and in the process, all of us have learned something.

Findings

The first post and an invitation to participate in this discussion forum went out on February 19th, 2004. As of March 17th, 2004, there have been six topics posted and 63 contributions to this forum. So far, participants from three states have contributed to or

given feedback about Tapped In. There are postings from Deaf teachers of ASL, Deaf students, working interpreters, and interpreting students.

I was surprised to find that only two working interpreters besides me have contributed to the discussion. Perhaps that is because there are so many other venues for them to get involved with this type of discussion. There are professional interpreting conferences every year. There are quarterly meetings of the San Diego County Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf. There are at least two listservs for interpreters who live and work in San Diego. Interpreters often work in teams and have an opportunity to network and talk with each other about their work. I do not know how much of their “off” time is spent discussing professional ethics and logistics, but I do know that Deaf people are not often included in these conversations.

I wondered at the beginning of this project if Deaf people would have enough incentive to participate. Of the first 15 people who I invited to participate in the pilot study, 7 were Deaf. Three of them chose to participate, and all three are still contributing to the discussions. Of the hearing people, working interpreters and interpreter educators, that I initially invited to participate, only one posted a response. Although the initial invitation was not sent to many Deaf students at the college where I teach, there have been postings from four Deaf students. It is apparent that these Deaf people do have strong opinions about issues that have affected or have the potential to affect their lives and well-being. To me, this is the most exciting finding for this particular project. It is a wonderful opportunity for any interpreter to have a place to get input from members of the Deaf community. The benefit to interpreting students is apparent because although I am not requiring participation, the discussion continues—even during spring break!

It seems as if this particular discussion forum has had a bigger draw for Deaf people and interpreting students, but less of a draw for working interpreters. Perhaps they are saturated with opportunities to discuss these issues. Perhaps they are too busy. The question of why working interpreters are not participating in the discussion remains an issue for future study.

Invitation to participate

If you'd like to read some of the discussions that have taken place or post a question of your own, please visit Tapped In. In order to participate, go to <http://ti2.sri.com>. You may choose to log in as a guest, or you may become a member by logging out and logging back in as a member. There is no charge to become a member. Yep, that's right, it's absolutely FREE! Once you are in the venue, do a search for "Melissabs" to find Melissa Smith's office. If you feel you know someone else who would like to participate, they are more than welcome to sign on.

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