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# From the Classroom to the Community: Supported Fieldwork for ASL-English Interpreters

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## Abstract

**This article aims to describe an approach to supervised mentorship that can help close the current readiness-to-work gap among graduates of both 2 and 4-year interpreter education programs, expand student confidence, prepare students for transition to work or additional education and partially restore the role of Deaf community members as cultural guides and gatekeepers. This sequence of mentorship settings can also be used to guide instructors in determining a student's readiness for practicum or internship placement, identifying the most appropriate fieldwork setting for each student, and alerting students and potential employers of their readiness to work.**

Keywords: Classroom-based scenarios; Cultural guides, Cultural gate keepers; Fieldwork; Internship; Practicum, Readiness-to-work gap

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## From Classroom to the Community

# From the Classroom to the Community: Supported Fieldwork for ASL-English Interpreters

The education and preparation of *ready-to-work* ASL-English interpreters has been a work in progress in the United States and Canada for the last half century. Experience and research has guided us in understanding the foundational knowledge and skills required to become a qualified interpreter, as well as the sequencing of course offerings and appropriate ways of evaluating student progress and graduate readiness to work. Educational requirements have been elevated and practicums or internships have been lengthened (Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education [CCIE], 2014). Interpreter educators have recognized the critical role historically played by members of the Deaf community as gatekeepers, determining who was respectful of Deaf culture, including the joys and struggles of Deaf individuals (Cokely, 2005; Moody, 2011). This realization has helped educational programs pioneer ways of building new allegiances with the Deaf community (Shaw, 2013), in order to maintain and enhance the development of linguistically and culturally prepared ASL-English interpreters acceptable to members of the Deaf community. However, interpreting students still struggle with being ready to work following graduation from both 2- and 4-year interpreter education programs.

In a recent in-house survey conducted at the University of North Florida of a group of 30 graduates from 2-year postsecondary interpreter education programs in the state of Florida, only 50% had any experience interpreting in a real-world setting. The survey indicated that the other 50% of students had only interpreted prerecorded texts; they had no experience dealing with the challenges presented in real or simulated situations or the opportunities offered by being able to ask for repetition or clarification, and so forth. The majority of these students came from face-to-face educational settings, as opposed to distance or online programs. These results point to a critical instructional and experiential area that needs to be addressed in our educational programs.

This article describes an approach to supervised mentorship that can help close this readiness gap, expand student confidence, prepare students for transition to work and encourage the restoration of the role of Deaf community members as cultural guides and gatekeepers. This sequence of mentorship settings can also be used to reinforce the integration of consecutive and simultaneous modes in community practice (Russell, Malcolm, & Shaw, 2008), guide instructors in determining an individual student's readiness for practicum or internship placement, identify the most appropriate fieldwork setting for each student, as well as alert students and potential employers of students' readiness to work.

## Preparation for Growing Work-Ready Interpreters

The mentoring experiences posed here are based on the assumption that students will engage in regular, ongoing interactions in a wide range of events with Deaf individuals in the community, both during and after their formal interpreter education. This goal of these types of community engagement support the development of attitudes and behaviours, not based on students' native culture and experiences, but on the language and culture of individuals who are Deaf (Sherwood, 1987, p. 16).

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In addition, such experiences address concerns about the need to connect interpreting students to cultural, social, experiential, and linguistic immersion in the Deaf community, which is sorely lacking in interpreter education based solely in academic settings (Moody, 2011; Shaw, 2013). These suggestions for opportunities for engagement also respond to the critical requirement for interpreting students to gain trust from the Deaf community—trust that must be earned, built, and maintained (Sherwood, 1987). The mentoring strategies outlined below will only close the readiness-to-work gap only if interpreter-education programs expect or them of their students.

### Level One: Observing Interpreter Models

It is one thing to read books, study research articles, and delve into all of the theories and approaches to interpretation. It is also critical for students to see “model” interpreters at work and to discuss specific challenges the interpreter encounters in the source language text the choices she makes. However, it is far more instructive to observe and interact with interpreters and consumers in actual interpreting settings. Structured observation allows observers to take notes, observe the dynamics, and meet with the interpreter observed afterward to ask questions about the decisions the interpreter made and what she was thinking at specific points of the interaction. Guided by an instructor, this kind of opportunity, turns theory into reality in a 3-D environment with predictable and unpredictable elements influencing the interpreter’s choices and performance.

Opportunities of this type should be offered at multiple points in an academic program, preferably in a range of public settings (e.g., a church service, an awards banquet, an elementary school play), as well as dialogic settings where appropriate (e.g., doctor’s appointment, job interview, parent–teacher meeting, etc.), ideally including interpretations into both signed and spoken languages. Following each interpreted event, student observers need an opportunity “to climb inside” the observed interpreter’s head. This involves the interpreter(s) and observers discussing observations, asking questions, and posing “what if” considerations. Such experiences support the development of critical thinking skills and the ability to link classroom learning with real-world events, and provides ways to impress on students how the confluence of context and participants influences linguistic and interpreting decision making. The supervising instructor, working interpreters, and where appropriate/ possible, the Deaf and hearing consumers of the interpretation should address issues such as those listed below, because these are required for an effective interpretation and can only be experienced with nonsigning individuals and Deaf individuals in real or simulated interactions.

- The interpreter’s role and responsibilities to stakeholder communities involved in the interaction;
- The function, experience, and boundary flexibility as a Deaf community ally in an interpreting setting;
- Identification of human dynamics and the influence of the interpreter upon the interpretation;
- Professional/ethical boundaries and choices that support the interpreter’s ability/ flexibility to render an interpretation that meets the consumers’ linguistic preferences while managing the flow of information to optimize message equivalence;
- The interpreter’s ability to understand and convey the meaning and intent in the source language discourse into a dynamic equivalent target-language message, appropriately reflecting genre, register, and culture, and with minimal interference from the source language;
- The interpreter’s ability to follow protocols typical for the specific setting, including managing the physical setting and making appropriate choices to use consecutive and/or simultaneous interpreting mode(s) to transfer meaning; and

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- The interpreter's ability to identify any effects of oppression, discrimination, influence of power and privilege within the event/setting, as well as notable majority- and minority-culture dynamics in the cross-cultural interaction (CCIE, 2014).

### Level Two: Interpreting in Mentored, Real-World Scenarios

In the second level of mentoring, students engage in role play scenarios, based on real life situations, and begin to practice interpreting between two people attempting to communicate (Shearer & Davidhizar, 2003). Instructors should prepare scenario guidelines (setting, type of interaction, some general suggestions about information to be used by the actors in the scenario, etc.). These mentored, lifelike scenarios should take place in small groups (ideally, no more than five or six students per group), with one interpreting mentor (typically a certified Deaf or hearing interpreter who works in the community), along with Deaf and hearing actors in each group. The interactions should include spontaneous ASL and spoken English, avoiding memorized scripts of any kind, with the expectation that students will initially use only *consecutive* interpretation mode. Following each role play, the actors and interpreting mentors should share brief comments, questions, and observations with the working and support student interpreters, while other students in the group observe. As student skills evolve, the scenarios should become gradually more challenging and students may be encouraged to use simultaneous interpreting mode for some segments of the role plays. Because research has demonstrated greater accuracy in consecutive interpreting, educators do not want to leave an impression that the more experienced interpreter should work primarily in simultaneous mode. Students and working interpreters should be encouraged to use consecutive interpreting as needed based on the specifics of each interpreting situation.

There are many benefits to this mentoring technique, including:

- "Introducing" students to members of the Deaf and interpreting communities as emerging interpreting students;
- Modeling respect for and including Deaf voice and experience in the education, beyond that of Deaf teachers, and beginning the process of eventual acceptance of new interpreters (Bancroft & Rubio-Fitzpatrick, 2011);
- Modeling respect for and expectations of national interpreter certification;
- Provision a safe place to practice emerging cognitive-processing skills, including support for the student interpreter to ask for clarification/repetition of something said/signed if needed;
- Practice in taking in and accepting honest feedback from Deaf community members and professional interpreters;
- Opportunities to develop comfort and strategies to work with other students in the role of team interpreter; and
- Occasions to develop comfort working with real people engaged in information exchange and to grasp the significance of how the individuals and topics involved impact an interpreter's ability to mediate cross lingual/cross cultural interactions.

Instructors should give participants in such unscripted, real-world interactions appropriate preparatory information. Below, I provide (a) instructions to the interpreter mentors for each group of students; (b) instructions to the student interpreters who will be working as a team for this particular role play; and (c) instructions for the Deaf and hearing actors with specific information about the scenario.

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### *(1) Instructions: To the Interpreter Mentor*

Thanks so much for volunteering to work with our students during a range of role plays on today. You will be working with a group of five to six students, one Deaf actor, and one nonsigning hearing volunteer. Your role is to observe the working student interpreters in each role play. One will be the “lead” interpreter and the other will be the “support” interpreter. As beginning interpreters, students are expected to use *consecutive interpreting*. The actors and student interpreters have been given some basic information about the situation that is to take place.

Please take notes on the interpretation observed, remembering this is the first or second time these students have worked with Deaf and hearing actors. At the end of each role play, you will take charge of a 5-minute feedback session. Ask the Deaf and hearing consumers to make whatever brief comments they have regarding the experience, then lead the student interpreters through a brief discussion of your observations. Feedback should be truthful while simultaneously balanced and constructive in identifying ways the interpreters could better construct an interpretation that conveys dynamic equivalent meaning between the actors involved.

### *(2) Instructions: To the Lead Student Interpreter and the Supporting Interpreter Student*

**Event and Prep:** You will be interpreting between a hearing second grade teacher at City Elementary School and the Deaf parent of a student in this teacher’s class for a routine parent–teacher meeting. In your prep, you Google the teacher’s name and discover s/he is a first year teacher, having just graduated with a teaching certification from State University. You are not familiar with parent–teacher meetings, so you should Google to find information about topics you might encounter. You recognize the name of the parents when given the assignment because this is a family you have interacted with at various Deaf community events. You have met the parents and their three children, all of whom sign fluently.

**Directions:**

- You are to check in with the teacher upon arrival. Make introductions and explain your role if needed. Do the same with the Deaf parent when s/he arrives.
- Be sure to agree with your support interpreter how you will indicate the need for a cue, where you will each be placed during the interpretation, and how you will handle introducing yourself to the teacher and Deaf parent.
- As practiced, you will be using *consecutive* interpreting throughout the role play.
  - LEAD INTERPRETER: Don’t be afraid to ask for clarification of something said/signed from your support interpreter or the teacher/parent. Remember to relax, breathe, and focus. Remember, perfection is not the goal. You can only learn and grow by making mistakes and figuring out how to avoid making the same mistakes next time.
  - SUPPORT INTERPRETER: Pay close attention to everything said/signed and be ready to give the lead interpreter a “feed” when asked. If a *critical* error, addition, or omission is made, alert the lead interpreter so s/he can determine what kind of correction to make. Finally, remind your interpreting partner that the goal is use of *consecutive* interpretation if s/he starts continually using *simultaneous* mode.

### *(3) Instructions: To Actors*

**Event:** Routine parent/teacher meeting

**Location:** City Elementary School, Second grade classroom

**Directions:** Familiarize yourself with the information below for your character. Don’t try to memorize anything. Be as natural as possible: Make up whatever names you want to use; draw on your personal background and experience. Use humour, clichés, or whatever is natural to you and your personality. Please speak directly to each other and rely on the student interpreter to mediate communication between the two of you. If you don’t

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understand something, ask for clarification. If you believe something you have said/signed has been miscommunicated, make corrections or clarifications.

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### INTERPRETER should check in with the hearing teacher – Deaf parent will arrive soon

| <b>TEACHER (Hearing)</b>  | <b>PARENT (Deaf)</b>  |
|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• This is your 1st year teaching</li> <li>• You have never met a Deaf person</li> <li>• You are curious about raising children who can hear, the use of signed language, etc.</li> </ul> <p><b>CONCERNS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Child’s speech seems delayed—you are wondering what exposure this child has to spoken English at home and elsewhere</li> <li>• Child is socially inappropriate:               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ touching other children to get their attention</li> <li>○ ...making faces at the teacher and other children when listening to them</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ You are a stay at home single parent, have 3 children, all hearing with ASL as their first language</li> <li>▪ You are active in the Deaf community and your children socialize primarily with Deaf children or other CODAs</li> <li>▪ You know your child               <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ is creative and uses advanced linguistic structures in ASL</li> <li>○ reads at grade level</li> <li>○ is sociable and outgoing but has limited social experience with non-Deaf/non-CODA kids</li> </ul> </li> </ul> <p><b>CONCERNS:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the teacher know anything about the norms and culture of families headed by Deaf parents?</li> <li>• How can you support the success of your hearing child in this class?</li> </ul> |

### Level Three: Engaging in Mentored Fieldwork

The final phase of better preparing students to move from the classroom to the community is mentored fieldwork. You might think of this as “mock internship,” giving students opportunities to interpret in real, as opposed to mock, situations with supervision from the instructors. In this phase, as students take their final interpreting classes before internship, instructors should schedule a minimum of one opportunity per month in which students interpret in public situations with the support of a qualified faculty member. Depending on a range of factors, there may or may not be Deaf consumers present, but an interpreting instructor must be present. Possible interpreting situations are events found at most universities, community organizations, public libraries; it might be an event sponsored by a local service club or organization, a presentation regarding specific issues, a panel discussion on a controversial topic, or a discussion of the history and evolution of a particular population or issue. Prior to the event, students should be required to (a) gather and share information for preparation, (b) determine where interpreters will be placed in the venue, and (c) determine how teams will be set up and how turn-taking will be managed. The instructor may observe the entire interpretation or may choose to take one or more turns teaming with student interpreters in order to model the appropriate approach to the work and to support students’ work. A debriefing session should be held immediately after the end of the event in which the experience is discussed, notes shared, and everyone checks in on what they learned from the experience.

Another benefit of mentored fieldwork is that the students just behind those who are preparing for internship can attend and observe their upper-class colleagues, see how things work in preparation for their own experiences in the following semesters and listen to the debriefing session. This is an effective strategy to help these students develop their observational, reflective and assessment skills.



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### **Level Four: Internship**

Finally, interpreting students should engage in an intensive internship or field placement, working under the supervision of certified interpreters in a range of settings. Such an experience should start only after interpreting instructors and identified members of the Deaf community have agreed that the student is linguistically and culturally ready. Student expectations should be the same as those held for professional interpreters working in the setting(s) involved, including preparation, pre-interpreting discussion with the team/supervising interpreter, working appropriately in the roles of working and supporting interpreter, and a debriefing session after the event. The supervising site interpreter should be familiar with the CCIE Standards 6.0 and 7.0 listed above and be able to include these critical elements in dialogue with the interpreting intern.

Students should begin the experience with some observation, moving fairly quickly to share work with the supervising interpreter and finally working alone in the setting while being observed/supported by the supervising interpreter. At the University of North Florida, students completing a 4-year degree in interpreting are required to engage in 200 hours of supervised interpreting—meaning “hands in the air”—in their final semester. Depending on the number of hours per week, this can range from 6–10 weeks of supervised internship. Because students don’t always have enough stamina initially to take a “full turn” as a team interpreter, they may begin by taking 10-minute turns and slowly increasing their interpreting time as their supervisor deems them ready.

### **Conclusion**

It is critical that the readiness-to-work gap in interpreter education be closed. This can only be accomplished with adequate, supervised hands-on practice and appropriate involvement of Deaf community members and professional interpreters in safe actual or simulated real-world settings. Experiences should include observations of certified interpreters followed by discussion between the observing students and the observed interpreter. These observations could continue in each semester throughout the 4-year academic program. In the first few semesters, students should participate in 2 to 3 days (suggested once a month) of simulated role plays, involving Deaf and nonsigning hearing actors and a certified interpreter mentor in each group. Mentored fieldwork in real settings with students interpreting should follow the simulated situations, supervised by a qualified instructor. Finally, students should engage in a minimum of a 200-hour internship, fully supervised by certified interpreters. Throughout each level of fieldwork, care should be taken to lay a foundation of understanding of the lived experience of Deaf individuals in a hearing-dominant, audist culture. This should build respect for Deaf community members and eventually the foundation of trust between emerging interpreters and Deaf individuals.

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