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Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

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Abstract

This article is based on the keynote presentation given at the convention of the Conference of Interpreter Trainers in Charlotte, North Carolina, in October 2012. It draws upon key principles for consideration in educating the next generation of interpreting students in further and higher education.

Key Words: digital education, flipped classrooms, technology, interpreter education

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Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

1. Introduction

I do not sign, nor do I speak a language other than my native American Southern English, so I obviously don't "interpret". Nor do I teach interpreters. In spite of these apparent shortcomings, I assure you that I do know something about the profession of interpreting, and quite a bit about the profession of teaching in general, and of teaching to create professionals specifically. What are effective methods? How do you bring about deep and lasting learning in students who aspire to become interpreters? How do you take a typical person and imbue in him or her the knowledge, skills, and values necessary to fulfill the unique role of professional interpreter?

I have worked with interpreters, especially sign language interpreters, since my days over 30 years ago as a clinical master's of social work student at a mental health center in an unnamed city that is also the capital of the state of Arkansas, in the USA. I offered clinical psychotherapy, through an interpreter, to deaf clients and their families. My master's thesis was on the delivery of mental health services to the deaf. Through both activities I gained an understanding of the both unique and indispensable role of the interpreter as communication conduit for some of the most personal and confidential exchanges imaginable, and of the existence and nature of the deaf community. As a counselor education instructor, I taught combined master's of mental health counseling/master's of rehabilitation counseling courses that were interpreted and also had deaf counseling students. As a student services administrator with responsibility for services to students with disabilities, I hired and supervised interpreters on a college campus, and I became more aware of the interpreter's role in classes of wildly divergent instructional quality. Since I have been a professional consultant and speaker, I have offered innumerable programs at schools and conferences with the assistance of interpreters.

While I know what interpreters do, I cannot say that I have insider knowledge on how they are trained, or exactly what happens inside interpreter education programs. I suspect many interpreter educators themselves may not know much about the methods used at other schools. While we always think the way we do things is "normal," most of us would be surprised by the variations in practice among programs that purport to the same goals of developing professional interpreters. The current state of affairs in most professional programs outside of interpreting—at least those I have had the opportunity to study—is of wide variation. Have no doubt that the lecture model is alive, though it never has been particularly well: In some programs, the only significant change in pedagogy since 1950 has been from chalk and blackboards to bullet-pointed slides. Other programs offer sophisticated, technology-heavy hybrid coursework, even to live/native/residential students. These increase student responsibility by moving the introduction to content and skills out of the class, through video-capture—a technology for which interpreter education might be particularly well suited. In such progressive programs, educators devote class time to helping students solidify their retention and understanding of the content, for practice in the development of functional, transferrable skills and the formation of an ethical and values-based professional persona.

Leveraging technology out of class and using effective, active in-class learning processes might be especially important in the development of professional interpreters, whose work is much more sophisticated than many in the lay public may appreciate. Interpreters "provide the meaning of" communication for both deaf and hearing clients and audiences. They do not transliterate individual words, or even encode sentences, into another language

 Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

or “sign words.” They must work at the highest level of professional behavior in helping others understand and establish meaning with the fewest filters possible.

2. Creating Professionals

With such lofty goals for professional knowledge, behavior, and attitudes, interpreter education programs must be what Lee Shulman (2005a, 2005b) described as “pedagogies of formation” designed to create professionals who can operate effectively in situations with new or limited information, and over the course of a career—a very apt description of interpreting. How does a program take entering students with limited or no working information about the languages of interpreting, the skills of interpreting, or the unique values that define the profession of interpreting and install this knowledge, skill, and value set in their students?

As noted, there are more effective and less effective methods for bringing about meaningful learning. Helping students develop knowledge, skills, and values is the stated goal of most professional education programs (though their language may vary), including interpreter education. Unfortunately, many programs remain tied to the traditional, lecture-based methods of higher education, as briefly alluded to earlier. The lecture model, with active faculty delivering content to passive, disengaged students, is still standard practice on most college campuses, though the effectiveness of this very old and widely accepted practice has never been well demonstrated empirically as a method for bringing about meaningful lasting change. That these methods persist in instruction in higher education is one of the great contradictions, oddities, and tragedies in any business or professional practice. The contradiction is that instructors are knowledge developers and deep thinkers in their professional fields, yet they often fail to apply that same science and analysis to their teaching practice. They rely instead on their faith in the way they were taught and the folklore about the nature of college teaching. A true conundrum is that schools routinely hire people who are experts in their content area, and possibly even in research in that specialty, then direct (and pay) them to teach—an activity for which they have had little, if any professional preparation. The apparent assumption is that if you are an academic or a practitioner, whether biologist, accountant, or interpreter, you can teach others to be that as well. These same individuals, well credentialed as they are in areas unrelated to teaching, would not be allowed to teach in most public primary or secondary schools since they do not have education credentials. But they are welcome to teach at colleges. Lecturing persists because it is what faculty like to do and they believe it was educationally effective with them, it looks like teaching to administrators, and students expect it. Except for the inescapable fact that it does not work well in bringing about meaningful lasting change, lecture methods are perfect. The tragedy, as well documented in recent and very public works like *Academically Adrift* (Arum & Roska, 2011), *Our Underachieving Colleges* (Bok, 2006), and *Declining by Degrees* (Hersch & Mellow, 2005) is that while students want and need to learn, faculty want to help students learn and develop (with a few notable curmudgeonly exceptions), and the world needs meaningfully educated professionals, extraordinary amounts of resources are being used (including rising costs to students, and significant chunks of students’ lives), outcomes are often poor because of reliance on these ineffective methods.

For interpreter education to maximize the learning outcomes of its students, each program, and the interpreter training community in general, must assess whether or not they are leveraging the most demonstrably effective methods to bring about deep and lasting change and professional development in its students. The processes of effective instruction are well documented. The promise and opportunity of the digital age is that there are online and tech tools available that can increase teaching effectiveness and that may be preferred by many of our “digital native” students, once they have had the opportunity to sample them (Prensky 2001a, 2001b). Unfortunately, most of these digital tools were not available, or were not used, when the older, “digital immigrants” on the faculty were trained, so they may not naturally gravitate toward them.

 Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

3. Meet Generation NeXt

It might be noted that this generation of learners from “Generation NeXt,” who are up to about 26 years old now and who make up the vast majority of students in most interpreter education programs in the U.S., are a different cohort of learners than their instructors were when they were in training, or than the learners who instructors served in the past. Their issues with academic preparation, responsibility and self-esteem, consumer expectations, use of technology, and styles of interacting can impact, and interfere with, their learning, persistence, and academic success at school, and workplace readiness and success. As has been noted, there is fairly compelling evidence that these students are not responding particularly well to traditional instruction in terms of learning outcomes and workplace readiness. While my articles (Taylor, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2010, 2011, 2012) detail the modal traits of Generation NeXt, a brief overview might be appropriate here: In addition to the outcomes issues previously noted, these students are more likely to have issues with compliance and accepting responsibility for their own learning than earlier generations, especially than the independent, adaptable, pragmatic, self-sufficient “latch-key” children of Generation X, born between 1966 and 1986 (Twenge, 2006). Students from Generation NeXt tend to be the product of child-centric families with protective and often intrusive parents who have done, and frequently do, for children what the children could manage on their own. These efforts often produce high self-esteem, even in the absence of demonstrable skill or achievement, though many trophies have been awarded for participation. The logical consequence of being rewarded for showing up is the entitlement mentality of expecting high grades for moderate effort, a tendency to underrate the amount of time and effort necessary for academic success while overrating their own skills and abilities, and a defensiveness to criticism. While these traits do not describe every member of Generation NeXt, record grade inflation at secondary (high school) levels with record lows for time spent studying suggest these issues are systemic.

Generation NeXt has also spent more time with technology, videos/screens, and the Internet than any other generation, so they might be expected to respond to online and digital learning resources. Technology is so pervasive in every part of their lives that they may perceive any engagement or service (including their interpreter training) that does not leverage online resources and digital technology as obsolete and irrelevant, and they may be right.

3.1. From Teaching to Learning

There are multiple models of effective, learner-centered pedagogies, but they tend to have common elements (O’Banion, 1999). From Barr and Tagg in 1995 with “From Teaching to Learning: A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education” and Gardiner in 1998 with “Why We Must Change: The Research Evidence,” scholars have been advocating a shift in classroom practice toward a model based on student activity rather than on the delivery of content. Other contributors like the National Research Council with *How People Learn* (Bransford, Brown and Cocking, 2000), the Teaching Professor network created by Maryellen Wiemer (Wiemer 2003, 2013), and my work from 2006 to the present all promote similar models, and are supported by the brain-based models of researchers like Leamson (1999) and Zull (2002). Newer interpretations favor methods leveraging online, digital, and “tech-heavy” resources (Taylor, 2012; Bowen, 2013). These accepted—though sadly relatively rarely practiced—learning models can mesh with digital, online and technology-rich elements for maximum effectiveness with today’s learners in interpreter education programs.

4. A Practical Model

In a series of articles (Taylor 2010, 2011, 2012), I described the application of learning theories to undergraduate education. How well interpreter education programs create, or form, professionals who can act effectively in the conditions of uncertainty of the real working world can be assessed by how well they are operationalizing each of the processes I describe. Briefly listed, they are:

- Improve student’s future orientation

 Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

- Identify class goals
- Improve student understanding of class expectations
- Move content learning out of class
- Create the necessity of preparing for and attending class
- Increase classroom activity and engagement
- Implement quality assessments and improved accountability

Effective learning processes tend to reinforce and support each other. These methods are designed not only to bring about the necessary changes in students' knowledge, skills, and values, but also to create necessary preconditions to effective student learning behaviors. Central precondition and process themes are increasing student compliance, especially with out of class preparation, which is central to "flipping" or inverting the classroom, and improving student responsibility for their own learning. Increasing student compliance in class is critical to students' being active learning participants in class, and it is the opposite of the traditional roles they are accustomed to in the traditional lecture class.

4.1. How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Improve Students' Future Orientation?

Central to creating professionals is helping them identify with the professional world and the professional roles they will occupy. In workshops I stress, "Don't teach students; teach the professional they aspire to become." This is critical to motivating students to do the work necessary to learn the content and skills, and to helping inculcate in them the values necessary to be a professional interpreter. Fieldwork early in the program, interviews with practicing professionals, and efforts to help students identify with the professional world through research are just a few techniques to further this process.

4.2. How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Identify Class Goals and Help Students Link Their Goals to Class Goals?

Once students start to see themselves in future professional roles, they can begin to connect the class content and skills to their future and success. (It might be noted that this is a much simpler process for classes that incorporate the name of the profession into the class, as do many interpreting classes. The greater the apparent gap between the name of the course and the name of the profession, the more difficult this process.) When students can identify how the content and skills in this class can help them in the future, they come to value and see worth in the material, and they can be motivated to put forth the effort to be successful students. Offering students a "menu" of possible future benefits of the course, allowing them to select the benefits they most desire and discussions with classmates around these future benefits can help them come to value the class, and to improve compliance with class expectations.

4.3. How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Improve Student Understanding of Class Expectations and Encourage Effective Student Behaviors?

Students, like other humans in general, tend to believe that what has worked for them in the past will work now. They may assume that the levels of time and effort they put forth in other education, like high school or other college classes, will be sufficient for success in their interpreter education coursework. This is probably rarely the case, except for the most elite and advanced students. If they will be expected to devote significant time and effort to their professional interpreter education classes, these expectations need to be made very clear very early in the process, ideally even before the students enroll in classes.

It is also possible, if not probable, that students who are expected to move out of the passive student roles they are often accustomed to and into more active learning behaviors may be resistant and reluctant to expend the necessary time and energy. Some may even rebel and admonish their instructor to "do their (the instructor's) job

Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

and teach” them (the students). Instructors need to help students understand why they as students are expected to be active participants in their own learning, in and out of class, by sharing with students what the teaching profession actually knows about how people learn, as opposed to how they were taught, or are being taught in other college classes. This can be a challenge if students have been or are being successful academically with little effort and even poor attendance. These effective student behaviors might include preparing effectively for class by spending focused time and accessing multiple learning resources, attending class, and being active, cooperative learners during class with classmates. Rewards for effective learning behaviors and consequences for passive and ineffective student behaviors should be a naturally occurring . For example, if students do not prepare for class, they do not receive class points for preparation, they may not be allowed to participate in class activities, and they will not accrue enough points to be successful. All of these expectations must be clearly outlined in the course syllabus to avoid student aggrievement.

4.4. How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Move Content Learning Out of Class?

To influence interpreter education students at knowledge (content), skills, and values levels, teachers must maximize the limited instructional time available to them. Faculty should move knowledge-level learning, such as learning the signs used to translate spoken words and ideas—which is easier—out of class, and bring more of the practice of skills—which is more difficult—into class. This is the process of flipping, or inverting, the class. Moving knowledge-level learning out of class frees class time for practice, with instructor supervision, of the skills of interpreting, which are more difficult than transliterating individual words or letters. Moreover, while there surely have been printed resources on signing for decades, some would say since 1620, newer digital and online resources can offer powerful content delivery tools that may be especially effective with today’s digital learners (Smith, 2008).

Interpreter educators are encouraged to coordinate the creation and curation of online and digital content so individual instructors, or programs, are not required to develop all the content alone, or rely on possibly inaccurate resources. Such a coordination role might be a valuable and appropriate one for a professional organization like the Conference of Interpreter Trainers.

4.5. How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Create the Necessity of Preparing for and Attending Class?

Content available out of class is of limited usefulness if students are not obligated to access it, to prepare meaningfully, and to subsequently attend class. When students have not prepared, instructors are often reduced to delivering the content during class time. While students can be encouraged to prepare through a variety of threats and inducements, faculty can make preparation for class a necessary part of daily and overall class success through the assignment of points, as clearly outlined in the course syllabus. How many points, or what percentage of overall class points, should be assigned for preparation should be decided by how much content there is for the class, how critical knowing the content is to course and professional success, and how much responsibility instructors want students to take in their own learning. If there is a lot of content, if it is critical to success, and if instructors want to create responsible professionals, as much as 25% of the overall course grade might be assigned for preparation, which can only be earned by being assessed on that preparation before or at the beginning of each class. This transforms preparation from homework that may or may not be graded after it is collected in class to preparation as precondition to class activity. If preparation for class is a necessary precondition to participating in class activity (see below), students are much more likely to prepare.

There are many mechanical and administrative concerns regarding when and how to assess student preparation, and how to manage the unprepared or underprepared student. Instructors need to address and manage these issues within their school’s policies. Basic procedures should ensure that the preparation is within the ability of students and that preparation is assessed for each student either before class starts (via the course management software) or as each student enters class, again, as a precondition to moving into the in class activity. Students who have not prepared as assigned will be denied actual, physical entrance to the classroom only by the bravest and possibly most reckless and near-to-retirement instructor. Barring a student from a class he or she has paid to

 Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

attend might generate grievance, as well possibly starting a domino effect of academic failure, as it is assumed that the assignment is content they will eventually need. A better strategy might be to allow the unprepared student to complete the preparation during the class, in the classroom, for partial credit, while other, prepared students are active and receive (or have the option to receive) full points for both preparation and participation in the activity. While the student who is not allowed to participate in an activity due to lack of preparation might be disgruntled and possibly aggrieved, if the expectations of and conditions for participating in in class activities have been made abundantly clear, this should not be a legitimate cause for grievance, although concerned instructors might want to get a local opinion. However, instructors' inability to enforce legitimate, meaningful out-of-class expectations on students is likely to severely limit their ability to bring about meaningful learning outcomes.

4.6. *How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Increase Classroom Activity and Engagement?*

A central tenet of all learning-, learner-, and brain-based approaches to teaching and learning is that to learn in meaningful and lasting ways, students need to be active, engaged participants in the construction of their own learning (O'Banion, 1999; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005). Although differentiating *activity* from *engagement* is not absolutely necessary, because they tend to be complementary processes, activity might be thought of as behavioral, like speaking or signing, whereas engagement might be the cognitive aspects of working with material, trying to understand ideas and working to apply them to the student's own experience and plans. When students prepare for class they are better able to be active engaged participants, since they actually have something to work with.

It is well established that, for whatever level learning is required to create a professional, active learning helps. If you want students to learn at the knowledge level, give them the chance to teach the content to someone else. Peer instruction is a well-documented, effective technique that gives students the opportunity to find the words they need to hear (or see in sign) to understand the content, as they attempt to help another person (or people) understand (Mazur, 1997).

If you want students to learn skills, particularly important in interpreter education, let them demonstrate the skill, or teach the skill, to other students. Especially effective is practicing skills with other students who rate or offer feedback on clarity and mastery. Also allowing for practice repetition, which is critical in the development of functional skills.

If you want students to incorporate values and come to care about the content and skills they are learning, give them the opportunity to convince another students of the significance of the content and skills. The affective foundation for this values element was established earlier in Section 4.2, "Identify Class Goals". As students have actively articulated how this class in general, or the content and skills they are working on in a particular class session, can benefit them in the future, they are more likely to value the material, come to care about that which the instructor—and the profession—wishes them to value, and truly become professionals. Simple in-class activities, like instructing students to tell their partners why knowing a particular skill is important, can have a powerful impact of students agreeing with that belief at the affective level, according to theories of cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). Dyads are considered here to be the central interactive dynamic for effective classroom activity, because they allows for the maximum number of students to be active, or constructing their own learning, the majority of the time.

4.7. *How Well Do Interpreter Education Programs Use Quality Assessments and Improved Accountability?*

Quality assessments refer to meaningful or authentic assessments, not simply regurgitation of content, which is usually the outcome of pencil-and-paper, objective tests with multiple choice, fill in the blank, and true or false formats. Authentic assessments focus on the demonstration of functional skills. Since interpreter education programs, and the profession itself, is so skills based, it is hoped that this is not an issue.

Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

Another feature of quality assessment is the inclusion of formative, as well as summative assessments (Mazur, 1997). A core element of peer instruction, *formative assessments* are measures of students and the learning process to provide feedback and improve the teaching and learning process, as opposed to *summative assessments*, which are measures of student learning at a specific point in time to assign a grade. Typical formative assessments include ungraded quizzes, in-class assignments, and practice tests. Feedback through audience response systems, or “clickers” is a core component of active formative assessment and effective peer instruction, and this should be considered in large classes or in classes in which authentic student disclosure of what they do and do not understand is important (Bruff, 2009; Caldwell, 2007; Duncan 2005; Mazur, 1997). Formative assessments can improve learning processes and outcomes by offering feedback and data on who is being successful at what learning tasks, and by offering the opportunity to improve outcomes for all learners, beyond traditional graded assignments and tests.

While a core goal of the model described here is to increase student responsibility for their own learning, the accountability aspect refers to instructors taking responsibility for providing the best possible teaching practice. The purpose of this article has been to offer just that opportunity to interpreter educators. For interpreter education to maximize its students’ learning outcomes, each program, and the interpreter training community in general, must assess whether or not they are leveraging these demonstrably effective methods to bring about deep and lasting change and professional development in its students. Only then will instructors have met the accountability challenge, and be able to assert that they are providing the most professional service to their students.

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 Teaching for Effective Learning in Interpreter Education

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