StreetLeverage.com: A Social Web for Interpreter Educators

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Abstract

This Open Forum article features an interview conducted with Brandon Arthur, curator of StreetLeverage.com. In this interview he describes the creation of StreetLeverage.com and the ways in which it is impacting educators, students, and practitioners. He explores the ways in which social media is shaping our field and how educators can embrace this new form of publishing in order to provide students with rich, meaningful material to bridge theory and practice. Finally, the article expands on the role of live events that build on dialogue as a mechanism for mobilizing interpreters and bringing changes to the profession.

Key Words: social media, blogs, vlogs, dialogue, leadership, education

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Brandon Arthur is a signed language interpreter in the United States, nationally certified through the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, and a passionate industry entrepreneur. He has worked on both the practicing and business sides of the signed language interpreting industry for the past 16 years. He is the founder and curator of StreetLeverage.com, an online community of reflective practitioners dedicated to providing insight and context on industry trends and developments.

Deb: Thanks for taking time to talk with me. StreetLeverage, per your Web site, is a community blog that offers interpreters context and insight on industry issues and topics. You say that this context is what is needed for interpreters to make informed decisions in a rapidly changing industry, and that the blog is one way to amplify the voices of interpreters. At the same time, interpreter educators around the globe are seeking and finding new ways to reach students, and using social media as a tool to enhance the education of signed language interpreters is a key strategy. StreetLeverage seems to be playing a key and very public role in influencing educators, students, and interpreter practitioners. So, how has that happened? When you started StreetLeverage, what did you hope would happen in terms of educating interpreters?

Brandon: Well, it's an interesting thing. To be very honest, I don't know that I appreciated the academic interest in the blog initially. The concept really came from a desire to connect people. I feel very fortunate in my career to have traveled and have seen a lot of amazing people at work and to be able to work alongside a lot of amazing people. And as I progressed in my career, having a variety of views of daily practice, I began to wonder about where we were going—everybody is so passionate about their own little sliver in the industry but perhaps not regularly stepping back to consider how everybody connects and the implications of those connections. I thought, What could we do if we were a little bit more aware of one another's ideas, projects, and concepts? And so the idea initially was, Let's just create a space where people can come and share ideas and perspectives and where people could engage with these new ideas and perspectives. I was hoping it would in turn stimulate reflection, a level of introspection that when they were out doing their daily work, that they would think—Oh, I remember reading about so-and-so's idea and the comments on it Now, how do I now apply that? Or how do I look at it through a different lens? Again, the goal is create a community of reflective practitioners.

Relative to education, as the site grew I started seeing comments from educators. Then I started getting e-mail saying, "I love this stuff. I'm using it in my classroom; my students are benefitting." It's just not something that had initially occurred to me, but it seems now that educators and students are probably one of the larger—if not the largest group of folks that consume the articles, interviews, and comments on the site. It's great that it has turned out this way. It's actually more meaningful to me—to be very honest. It may not make for a great interview, but it was completely unexpected.

Deb: I think that serendipity is probably the most wonderful thing that can happen in any aspect of our lives, so it sounds like it's doing exactly what it's supposed to be doing.

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Brandon: It seems to be. And—as you and anybody who is putting forth an effort that doesn't have a revenue model per se, and StreetLeverage doesn't, know—it takes a lot of time and commitment, but I am certainly the largest beneficiary. I get to rub elbows with many industry titans and I get to spend time learning from them. When they come to me and say, Hey, what do you think about this? I'm like, I should be asking you these questions as opposed to the reverse. So it's much to my own benefit. You might consider it a completely self-serving effort. It is certainly a huge—a huge benefit to me.

Deb: Okay. Given that that you hadn't anticipated that your target audience or the largest number of consumers that are using that material in really important ways are interpreter educators, have educators talked to you a little bit about what they're doing with the material? Because I assume they're doing something more than just having students read it.

Brandon: I've had contact with a few interpreter educators on how they use the site with their students. In my view educators are primarily using it as an exposure tool. This works because media and publishing today are so swift that traditional academic institutions struggle to keep up with what's current, and all the while knowing it will only change tomorrow. Additionally, educators are using the site as both a way to reinforce concepts and introduce others. It helps that it all comes wrapped in the practical experience of working practitioners and educators. What I enjoy about StreetLeverage is that it allows students to link classroom learning with current issues and practices. The educators that I have a more personal relationship with reveal that they can feel constrained by programs or by what is required of them by virtue of their position. StreetLeverage is also an outlet for them to encourage their students to see other points of view and opinions that the educator may not be able to espouse in their particular program. I like to believe that the site is helping, in some small way, to close the education-to-work gap. It's interesting, Deb, because I think in many ways, StreetLeverage is a platform for people who otherwise wouldn't share their ideas or views, and that is what makes it so valuable to the interpreting community and as a tool for educators.

Deb: Can you say some more about that?

Brandon: It's about a perception that permission is necessary. We look at the industry titans and say, They've been in the field 50 years, they're a Ph.D., they've written, like, 5,000 books; of course they should have the stage, of course they can share their ideas—they have earned it. When people are presented with an opportunity, in my view, they often question if they have permission. Often when I approach people asking them to consider writing for StreetLeverage they're like, Me? Really? And then they write something, and it's wildly successful. An example of that would be Amy Williamson-Loga, who very honestly was somewhat timid about the idea; and her piece has had nearly 10,000 hits, and her perspective is really resonating with people. Without being asked and without a community platform she may not have taken an opportunity to share her views.

Deb: I think it's a really good example, though, of somebody who I would view as an educator, but she probably doesn't view herself as an educator but the impact she is having from her article on StreetLeverage is education and dialogue that reached nearly 10,000 viewers.

Brandon: That's right.

Deb: Now you've got live events in addition to the blog—can you describe those for us?

Brandon: StreetLeverage—Live is an effort to extend the dialogue that is occurring online to a live environment. The impetus behind the live event began at my job. I travel quite a bit, and I get to meet with a lot of interpreters. And oftentimes, the whisper in the hall is, I love what you are doing with Street Leverage. To which I say, I don't see you commenting on the site. Why not? They are surprised to know that I know that, but I am moderating the site after all. StreetLeverage doesn't have some massive team of media people. It's me in a dark room with a peanut butter and jelly sandwich trying to make connections. While encouraging these folks to comment on the articles and interviews, they're like, Oh, no, I wouldn't dare put something out there. I'm too nervous. In digesting

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their comments, I thought, if we could create a live event where people could look each other in the eye and not have the fear of the faceless critic from cyberspace, maybe they would be more inclined to share. And so we did what I would call the pilot event in the Washington, D.C., area last November (2012), and it was very successful. We had great speakers and had a lot of very insightful comments from participants, which had everyone from students to very experienced practitioners. It was a confirmation to me that some people need the live environment to feel a little bit more comfortable.

The live event consists of a main session where speakers share their ideas and engage with the audience following their talk, modeled after TED Talks. Speakers then host workshops in the afternoon doing a deeper dive on their ideas. My hope is that the live events will lead to something that's collectively actionable. At the end of the day, it's great to be a community of reflective practitioners and people considering the work, but if we don't focus the power of the ideas that we're sharing, then I will personally feel as though we have we've missed our biggest opportunity.

Deb: And so you host StreetLeverage, both ASL vlogs and blogs, and the live events, and you have a presence on Facebook. Any other forms of social media that you are using as an educational tools or a tool for mobilizing idea exchange?

Brandon: We are on Twitter, which I know you know. You re-tweet some of that. We are also on LinkedIn. I want StreetLeverage to be in all the places where a practitioner connects so that we can be there when they need insight from a fellow colleague. An example: I got an e-mail yesterday from a gentleman that said, Hey, I'm having a problem where I'm being challenged for some of my personal work by an agency. Do you have any articles that might help? I sent him references to a couple of pieces, to which he later replied sharing how useful they were. I want StreetLeverage to be there when a practitioner has a need for a moment of reflection. I want them to tap into the collective power of shared ideas to help impact their current situation for the better.

Deb: So relevant—and it strikes me that you've really taken advantage of the power of currency—I mean knowledge as currency and fresh knowledge as currency—and put it out there. I have a couple of grad students who are doing literature reviews this term, and they have asked about whether they can cite blogs. And that's not traditional, obviously, so we have had some great conversation about what is publishing in this new world of social media and that students will use those blogs, vlogs, and so on. But that's a challenge for educators as we find new ways to quote the material, and that's material that they need. Students are contrasting traditional published material that may have been published some 20 years ago and looking at the concepts with a current connection. I think you've really caught onto something that's huge. It's got the potential to change practice for those teaching in traditional programs as well because we're challenged now to look at where knowledge is created, what publishing means, and the role of social media in our teaching and learning environments.

Brandon: I can appreciate the challenge. Clearly, we don't want to consider material that isn't well researched or well thought out. And unfortunately the quality of writing and accuracy of the information on the Web is inconsistent. I can appreciate the trepidation that educators have about more live-time media as a result. Anybody can publish his or her own mental drip. With that said, I do think that there needs to be a level of recognition that practices evolve and, as they do, the best way to share those developments will be on the social web.

Deb: You've been talking about it as publishing, and that's what it is, but how do educators ensure that students are being exposed to quality, that sites are able to maintain quality and critical reflection? What kinds of quality markers should they look for when including social media sites that students incorporate in their learning?

Brandon: Great question. In my view, I would be encouraging students to visit sites that have multiple perspectives and voices—and it's part of why I view myself more as a curator than I do a blogger. StreetLeverage.com has a large number of contributors, and it's the power of the different perspectives that helps keep what I would consider appropriateness and truth and proper practice alive and well. Achieving those things is often harder when it's a single voice. It is my view that if you have a convergence of voices, you have an inherent check and balance. If you look in the comments on sites with multiple voices, you will note that someone will post

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something that will be way off, and then the community of people practicing will quickly reframe, will adjust, will challenge, and then slowly but surely it works itself out. It's the power of community that keeps the quality high. And that's not to say that there aren't brilliant people out there that are sharing all the time, but I think it's a stronger educational tool when a blog or vlog represents the experiences of many people, not just one person. It's not absolutely required, but another marker is when people are encouraged to comment using their real names. If there's a sense that one's comments are attached to them, they moderate their comments a little more, and the rest of the community helps to support an appropriate model of engagement.

Deb: Brilliant. Lessons learned in your short history?

Brandon: This is the question that I think I've struggled with the most. There are several. One big lesson that I have learned is that ideas can and do in fact change the profession. I've also learned that people enter the dialogue in many different ways. Lynnette Taylor was helping me one evening while we were at the first StreetLeverage—Live event. I was talking to her about a couple of comments on the site that I was struggling to get over. She shared, "You know, Brandon, oftentimes that approach is the only way people can start to participate in the dialogue, and it takes that act for them to accept being challenged and then to progress along." With that, another big lesson learned is that people feel a tremendous satisfaction when they feel their contribution has made a difference.

A great lesson and also the most beautiful part of the StreetLeverage effort: I love telling the current week's writer how their piece is doing. It's so satisfying to say to an Amy Williamson, who as mentioned was a little bit nervous—Your piece is killing it! You're seeing thousands of hits—which is rock star status on this little Web site. The satisfaction that is evident, particularly when they may not see themselves as an educator, as you mentioned. When an idea has been embraced and people express benefit from having reading it, change has occurred. Now for the greatest lesson learned, people are inclined to contribute, they just need an invitation. Again, it's often about feeling a need for permission. Once they realize how important their contribution is, and can be, people begin to take action and feel more accountable for their work. It is very satisfying to people to begin to act for the betterment of the field.

Deb: Excellent. Questions I should have asked you and I didn't?

Brandon: I don't know that there are any particular questions. The only thing that really comes to mind is how academia can reinforce an effort like StreetLeverage. In my view, academic institutions and educators should be encouraging thought leadership and individual contribution at every stage of development within one's career. This type of reflection is valuable, and if done appropriately and in appropriate spaces, contributes to the progression of our field exponentially; as opposed to waiting for permission. We have so many brilliant people in the field; we just need to liberate their voices and ideas. Another question may be, what can academia do to further the learning on the social web? To your earlier point, this will be a medium that isn't going away and will be increasingly used in the classroom. For institutions to adopt it and create a mind-set of encouragement—I think the students will be better positioned to connect with their colleagues and think through the challenges we do and will face as a field.

Deb: I really appreciate all you are doing. This has been very enlightening to think about the ways social media can be a real-time tool in student learning. Thanks you for your time, leadership, and dedication to our field. The world is a better place because of StreetLeverage.

Reference

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