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Deb Russell

University of Alberta, drussell@ualberta.ca

Colin Allen

National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, cjadls@rit.edu

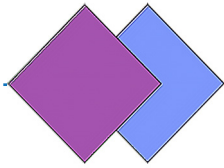
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Global Pride: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Interpreting

Debra Russell¹

University of Alberta, Canada

Colin Allen AM

National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology, USA

Abigail Gorman

Birkbeck College, University of London, UK

Abstract

This open-forum article highlights an interview conducted with Colin Allen, a Visiting Lecturer from the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at Rochester Institute of Technology and Abigail Gorman, an activist and graduate student at Birkbeck College, University of London, in the UK. In this interview, they highlight their experiences while coordinating International Sign interpreters for Global Pride, a virtual international global event that took place in June 2020. This was the first time that Global Pride has provided communication access to the international deaf LGBTIQIA+ Community via sign interpreting services. (For the purposes of this article, LGBTQIA+ refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, queer, and asexual. The plus sign allows for the inclusion of different subjects, such as allies, polyamorous, androgynous, and pansexual.) Providing sign language access across multiple time zones for a 24-hour livestreamed event was a “first” for both Global Pride organizers and the two deaf interpreter coordinators. Their experiences offer interpreters and educators a glimpse in some of the many exciting developments of a world that has had to pivot a number of conferences and events to online platforms amid a global pandemic.

Keywords: interpreters and interpreter education; International Sign; accredited interpreters; deaf interpreters; online access and equity; policy frameworks, LGBTIQIA+; human rights

¹ Correspondence to: drussell@ualberta.ca

Global Pride: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Interpreting

Colin Allen AM is the former president of the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) and is a Visiting Lecturer at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) in Rochester, New York. He is also a first-year graduate student in the School of Individualized Study (SOIS) in the area of international deaf leadership. Abigail Gorman is a human rights activist based in London, U.K., and a postgraduate student in the field of gender and sexuality at Birkbeck College, University of London.

Deb: Thanks so much for taking time to talk with me about your experiences working with the Global Pride 24-hour event held in June 2020. Can you tell us a little about your journey of involvement in the LGBTIQ+ community?

Colin: As a gay man, I've been involved in the LGBTIQ+ community for many years in Sydney, Australia. I was previously on the board for the Australian Deaf Gay and Lesbian Association. I have also been very active at the international level throughout my involvement in the World Federation of the Deaf (WFD) [and] so have attended events in many countries. As well, I used to work with an HIV and AIDS project, which was designed to raise awareness of HIV for the deaf community. I've also been involved with Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras, which is a festival that's held during the month of February every year in Sydney. And at the end of Mardi Gras, there's a large parade and then a dance that has probably five or six different shows that take place throughout the night—it starts at 10 p.m. and runs all night to 10 a.m. In the early years, my former partner and I would go, and there were no interpreters for any of those shows, so we lobbied the organizers to provide access for the deaf LGBTIQ+ community, which they agreed to do, so my first experience was very positive. And we were able to involve the deaf and hearing community members to take their place on the stage, and as time has gone on, we've had over 25 years of having interpreting services for those events in our community in Sydney.

Deb: So, why was it important to have International Sign included in Global Pride?

Abigail: As I mentioned in my introduction, inclusivity is important. When you organize an event, it's important to ensure that it's an event where people feel valued and respected and have the same access as others do. For years, the LGBTIQ+ community has fought to gain equal standing in society. To ensure that everyone is truly equal, there must be equitable opportunities for all.

Colin: Why is this important? As I said previously, I've had a great deal of involvement with Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras. I've been involved in a number of different pride celebrations throughout the world, be it parades, parties, festivals, and so on. And many of those involve their own country's sign language interpreters being present and making access possible. And then our world was hit with COVID-19. That meant many of the parades and festivals had to be canceled around the world. So, a group of organizers then came to the idea that they could host a global Pride celebration by livestreaming it, as one way to still celebrate in the midst of the pandemic—and make it a 24-hour event beginning June 27. So, about 2 weeks before, around June 11, I saw the Twitter feed that advertised the 24-hour World Pride event, so I responded on Twitter asking if they were providing International Sign interpreting and captioning services. They responded to me and indicated that they were not providing that service. That didn't sit well for me, so I reached out to Abigail, and she began engaging with them on Twitter, too, so both of us were putting pressure on them, to which they said they were providing sign language interpreting. Abigail then asked them the pointed question—which sign language were they providing?

We moved from Twitter to engaging in email correspondences with them, only to realize that they were planning to offer American Sign Language interpreting. The two of us took on the task of trying to educate them. We used a lot of information from the WFD² and the World Association of Sign Language Interpreters (WASLI) regarding International Sign. We then requested a Zoom meeting. So, from the initial Twitter engagement on Sunday, to the subsequent emails, within 2 days, we were able to have a virtual meeting. Our conversation meant that Abigail and I could spend a great deal of time talking to them about the fact that, given their goal of hosting a world Pride event, using American Sign Language (ASL) is great, but that doesn't provide access to the rest of the world who don't understand ASL.

2 See: <http://wfdeaf.org/our-work/wfd-wasli-international-sign-interpreter-accreditation/wfd-wasli-accredited-is-interpreter/>

Abigail: If people from various countries do not share a common language, International Sign (IS) can be used to ensure smooth communication by using various methods, such as iconic signs and loan signs from various countries. The main reason for deciding to use IS instead of ASL lies in the name of the event...Global Pride! This will be seen from many countries all over the world, and it was noted that not everyone will have had the opportunity to learn ASL, so IS was deemed appropriate for this event.

Colin: Right! So, we talked about sign language, how there are approximately 300 different sign languages in the world, and that there is International Sign. I have had the privilege of being involved with WFD, and I have had a great working relationship with WASLI, so we talked about where IS interpreting is used—for example, at WFD congresses, WASLI conferences, Deaflympics, and so on. The whole conversation was a huge eye-opener for them, and they made the decision at that moment to change from ASL to using International Sign. So, in the back of my mind, I thought, “Can they actually pull all of this together in just a couple of weeks?” So, then Abigail and I realized we would need to support them in a huge way and take on the task of bringing International Sign to this event. So, why this is so important is that because it is Global Pride, it’s livestreamed. If we didn’t take a stand on this, the global deaf LGBTIQ+ community would have no access to the livestream event. So, we’re talking about equal access and inclusion—it’s a human rights approach.

Deb: So, how did you determine the criteria for the team? How many deaf and nondeaf interpreters were part of the team?

Abigail: Initially, IS interpreters accredited by the World Federation of the Deaf and World Association of the Sign Language Interpreters were contacted. As a result, nine of the 29 accredited IS interpreters submitted an expression of interest. As this was insufficient to meet the need, nonaccredited IS interpreters were headhunted based on their past experience of interpreting in informal settings. To ensure standards were maintained within this group, people who had completed the European Master in Sign Language Interpreting (EUMASLI) degree were also approached and included, as they had all studied in International Sign and were viewed as potential IS interpreters. Of the 27 nonaccredited International Sign interpreters contacted, 11 indicated interest, meaning that, in total, there were 20 IS interpreters to facilitate interpreting for Global Pride 2020. We ha[d] interpreters from Canada, Scotland, USA, France, Australia, Argentina, Fiji, New Zealand, Italy, Austria, Spain, and the Netherlands.

Colin: Our email provided all the information and asked them to respond quickly, within 48 hours, understanding that this was volunteer service. Given the event was going to cover a full 24-hour period, across multiple time zones, we asked if the interpreters would provide an hour or two of service. So, we started to get responses back, and we had nine accredited interpreters confirm. We quickly realized that we didn’t have sufficient capacity within that accredited group. Then, we identified names of deaf and hearing nonaccredited interpreters that we felt met the experience criteria and emailed all of them, and this group had only 24 hours to reply to us. In the end, we were able to get over 20 interpreters in just a matter of 4 days—that was amazing, and I think speaks to the commitment of the interpreters to ensure access for the LGBTIQ+ community. It was interesting because 14 out of the 20 were deaf interpreters, and of these, seven were WFD-WASLI-accredited deaf interpreters. They also worked with a co-interpreter who could feed them in a national sign language³, or the deaf interpreter could choose to work from the captioning; however, the majority of them worked with feed interpreters.

Deb: It seems phenomenal that you were able to pull together that many IS interpreters in just a few days. So, then the event took place—what were the challenges in coordinating once the event launched?

Abigail: There were various challenges: timing, technology, preparation, and scheduling. The organization from our side was done in such a short time, and if we had more time, we would’ve been able to use it to source more qualified interpreters, ensure that they had enough time to prepare their materials, and have appropriate time to discuss with their co-workers. The interpreters received the prep materials the day before, and for some, it was hours! The schedule continued to change throughout the event, which meant our interpreters worked for longer than they were supposed to and were not able to prepare for those materials, but they took it in their stride and did well.

Colin: That’s a great summary. I would add that, fortunately, Abigail and I had experience working together previously for WFD congresses. Abigail is a strong lobbyist, and she is great with social media. Abigail knows the U.K. context, and I know

³ For further description of deaf and hearing interpreters working in a model of co-interpreting, see Russell & Stone (2011); the concept is similar to spoken language interpreters relying on another interpreters’ interpretation (pivot interpreter) to construct their target language interpretation.

the Australian picture, plus both of us are very familiar with the international deaf and the deaf LGBTIQ+ community. One of the first challenges was to think about how to get the interpreters on the livestream because the organizers had already made 26 hours, not 24 hours, of prefilmed content to stream. So, the organizers used Zoom to embed the sign language interpreting on the screen.

We asked the organizers to create some guidelines or instructions for the interpreters, and when we received them, we had to edit them and add to them, in order to have it explicit for the interpreters. We were fortunate to have Alex Jones work with us, as he was very familiar with the technology required to do the Picture in Picture with the interpreters, so in the end, we had the logistics sorted, and the interpreters received that information just 3 hours before the event launched. Global Pride in San Francisco, USA, had two people splitting the responsibility for managing all the technical aspects. Our next challenge was the time zones; between San Francisco, Abigail in London, and me in Rochester, New York, there was 5 hours between us. In terms of the launch, it was 1 a.m. for me and 6 a.m. for Abigail—and she was the lead on the implementation. We had direct access to the technicians in San Francisco through text. Given that the interpreters got the technical specification so last minute, one of the additional challenges was to make sure that the interpreters understood the technology.

When the Global Pride content was being played, there was one interpreter on screen. But there were unanticipated problems with that in that the interpreters were placed in the bottom-right-hand corner versus the top-right-hand corner. Sometimes the captioning and/or the Global Pride logo blocked the image of interpreter.

Abigail: With clear communication, patience, and a good attitude, we resolved most of the issues. Everyone was aware that this was all done at the last minute, but it also had the potential to reach so many people around the world, and they were understanding and supportive when things didn't go as expected, which bolstered us all even more.

Colin: We set up a WhatsApp group for all of the interpreters, and then we had separate groups, organized per the four different time shifts. So, we kept feeding information to the team especially so that the teams had the live current schedule changes, knew when to switch, and we could agree upon signs that were effective and so on. We had also asked for and received a run of show which had over 800 different names, but the timing was not identified. And we received that 2 days before, which meant that Abigail and I had very little time to try and figure out which language each speaker was using, in an attempt to match interpreters with those languages.

The organizers said that 90% of the content was captioned in English; however, they were streaming through YouTube, which has auto-captioning that conflicted. However, the technicians were able to solve that problem. We had other glitches in that some of the interpreters were working with Wi-Fi that wasn't stable, or there were times when the Spanish speaker was spotlighted, and the interpreter was not visible, and there was no captioning for the speech. Other times, the interpreting was significantly behind the speaker, or the interpreting was choppy, so next time, we know the interpreters need to be plugged in to the Internet and not using a Wi-Fi network, as it doesn't provide the stability needed for quality interpretation. Finally, Abigail and I worked for over 25 hours straight with no sleep in order to coordinate this event, so it would have been great to have a larger coordinating team.

The communication through WhatsApp with the interpreters was one solution to time zones. Getting the technical descriptions is important, and the Picture in Picture worked well for the prerecorded content; however, the picture size was small. Again, we were late to the game—receiving the information 1 week in advance would have given us time to realize that it was better to have the interpreter higher on the screen. Next time, we will need to be clearer about the feed interpreter processes—for example, it would be better for the co-interpreters to be in the same room as the deaf interpreter; some of them were working from a distance, which also created some challenges.

Deb: Despite the challenges, it sounds like there were a number of aspects that worked really well.

Colin: The fact that the interpreters stepped forward to do this work with very little notice was just great, and they were so flexible. So, it was a privilege for the two of us to provide support to them. We had asked them to evaluate the event, and we got a huge response, which was great, and that information can inform the organizers as they continue to offer online events. Obviously, there are some things that would increase the quality of interpretation, including the timing of getting information, more clear scheduling, and detailed run of show time frames, ensuring the interpreters could preview the videos, and so on, but overall, this event was viewed as a huge success—the Twitter and Facebook messaging was incredibly positive from our global deaf LGBTIQ+ community and our allies.

We had a meeting 1 day before with the team to talk about some of the terminology for LGBTIQ+ in International Sign, and it was very helpful to agree upon appropriate terms. The WhatsApp group really was a successful piece of being able to communicate behind the scenes.

Abigail: I would say it would be the attitudes of the interpreters. They all supported each other and provided encouragement and praise. From the audience, they said it was amazing to be able to access it at any time during the day, just like everyone else did.

Deb: *Would you do it again, and if so, what would you do differently?*

Colin: Would I do it again? Absolutely—I would do it differently, of course. What I would do differently, obviously, is to have much more advanced planning and form a larger coordinating team. There was only two of us, and we needed a coordinating team of four, so that we could have each taken a 6-hour shift. I think those are two things. The run of show timing in advance would have been helpful, and getting the lyrics to the songs in advance would have been very helpful. One of the interesting pieces was that several of those interpreters were uncomfortable interpreting songs, leaving a much smaller group willing to do music. Despite having a program, it appeared to keep changing, and we would have no advance notice of that change. For example, one interpreter from Fiji was prepared to do the “YMCA” song, and the technician didn’t switch to him, so the first interpreter that hadn’t prepared for the music was left to do it. The interpreters demonstrated a great deal of flexibility throughout their shifts.

One of the learnings was working with the interpreters who were not yet accredited. They were nervous about being on the international platform and were very open to feedback. Many of them acknowledged that they felt like they defaulted to interpreting into American Sign Language, especially when they struggled to represent the concepts in full visual International Sign. It’s really important that we have a strong cadre of International Sign interpreters. Obviously, they need training, and how and where to get that training is challenging. Many of those interpreters that we watched had a great deal of potential. Potentially, nine out of the 11 should seriously think about applying for the accreditation process, as they’re very close. But the training for this specialized area is key—we had one interpreter that used a sign that may be accepted in the Asia Pacific but was offensive and perceived very negatively by [the] global deaf community. So, it would be good to have a group that really ha[s] a solid understanding of the terminology and the philosophies that frame this work.

Abigail: It is necessary to receive the running sheet showing the sequencing of performances and including confirmed songs with videos in sufficient time so that interpreters can be scheduled appropriately and logistics worked out, in advance of its release to the interpreters. It is vital that all interpreters have access to all videos with captions. Receipt of videos via Dropbox proved challenging for some interpreters who may have been unfamiliar with some of the computer applications used [almost all the interpreters were not able to access the full 2-hour video segments via their laptop, although it was available via iPad]. To alleviate concerns about redistribution of videos, videos sent to interpreters could have a watermark stating “Not intended for public use” on them. There needs to be further dialogue about what is reasonable in terms of size of the Picture in Picture (PIP) on screen, as there were a number of occasions when the PIP appeared to block the open captions or organizational logos during the event. It would be ideal to have training for the technical team so that basic signs could be shared so there was no confusion as to when the switch between interpreters should occur and to cover other relevant issues. Finally, the key coordinator(s) should be notified of any changes to the running sheet, delays experienced during screening, or decisions made to replace songs because the interpreters undertook significant preparation prior to their appearance and needed to be aware if last-minute changes occurred.

Ideally, the coordination team should have at least four coordinators, with each to be responsible for 7 hours of performances during the 26-hour event. The coordinators need to be involved from the start of the planning for the event, with a representative from this group to attend meetings with the executive production team. The members of the coordination team need to ensure effective communication with each other, including understanding the challenges involved, the commitment required, and the need to regularly check messages received via the WhatsApp Group to ensure the next coordinator is fully aware of any changes. All of the coordinators should be included in all email correspondence, which would assist all coordinators to know what had been discussed or any changes which arise throughout the event.

Deb: What is one takeaway that you think educators, interpreters, and organizers need to pay attention to?

Colin: So, when we think about Global Pride, it is so key that interpreting services be provided in the most universally accepted manner, and they had absolutely no problem with the concept of providing access—they were 100% in. They had just a fabulous attitude towards it. I would say that in my experience working at the global level with the LGBTIQ+ community, this was one of the most positive experiences. These organizers really understood the significance of quality and inclusion for the deaf community, and especially the deaf LGBTIQ+ group.

Ironically, there are times within organizations in the deaf community where we have to really fight for access. But within this minority group, it was the LGBTIQ+ community who understood the significance of being able to accommodate us from a human rights and linguistic rights point of view. Contrast that with national deaf associations, who can have a negative attitude towards access and make the argument that it always comes down to money. Now, in this situation, we had 20 volunteers, and maybe that's why it was successful. If it had to be a paid issue, maybe the organizers would have been less interested in providing access.

Abigail: Our advice to those training IS interpreters is to ensure that you have a mix of deaf and hearing people who have experience in interpreting. Bring in deaf people to practice with. As mentioned before, IS is quickly evolving, and young people are using technology to communicate with each other more than before. This means their IS will be at a faster pace than what is used at conferences—interpreters should have training with people of all ages to learn how to adapt to speed and registers.

Create a survey to ask deaf people what they would like to see from IS interpreters, how to work together, and what they think is good practice and implement the feedback in your training.

Actively seek out people from a variety of backgrounds and encourage them to get into IS interpreting. The current WFD/WASLI accreditation list is hearing-/White-/male-heavy. Work with associations to create more pathways for IS interpreters.

Colin: My advice to educators training interpreters for international work is this: The International Sign needs to be taught by deaf instructors that are familiar with the global use of International Sign. While there are some hearing instructors who may also have international experience, they will typically have a sign language accent based on their national sign language, be that ASL, BSL, Auslan, etc. Work with qualified and experienced deaf instructors. The specific lexicon expected in the event needs to be discussed during training, so in this context, terminology related to the LGBTIQ+ community, what is visually appropriate and acceptable for a global audience, and how to work with feed interpreters to achieve the best interpretation. The training can happen in face-to-face training and/or remotely. We have seen several countries train interpreters using instructors from outside the country by employing technology like Zoom.

Abigail: For organizers, accessibility should not be an afterthought—seek out guidelines for accessibility and bring in people with adequate knowledge and skills to work together to provide access. There's nothing about us without us; bring deaf people into the team to work with you. We will be able to identify blind spots and come up with solutions. We're able to offer insights and ideas that you may have not previously thought of. We have experience in this area and have a network of contacts, as proven with Global Pride. Some additional points for conference organizers based on our final evaluation: There should be a balance between gender, race, sexuality, age, region, and individuals who are deaf or can hear within the interpreting team. Interpreters should undertake a test run prior to the event to ensure that lighting and dress code is appropriate. There should be representation of differing genders within each team. All of the interpreters should be required to be available for at least 2 hours instead of just 1 hour during an event, if at all possible, as interpreters tend to perform better after "warming up" and in case of mishaps or time overruns so that substitutions can be made, if necessary. When performances are not available in English or with English captions, the key coordinator(s) need to be notified so that interpreters can be organized and slots can be allocated to those who have the required language proficiency. Interpreters need to be sure that their Internet connections are sufficiently robust for both plug-in connections and Wi-Fi. Feeds should use Zoom to feed their deaf interpreter partners so that the IS interpreters are able to interpret simultaneously rather than relying on the delayed coverage via YouTube or the specific host organization's website. The key coordinator should organize a meeting with all interpreters prior to an event to address any issues and confirm relevant signs at least 1 week prior to an event. The interpreters should arrange time to meet their co-interpreters, to facilitate rotation arrangements, and to discuss other relevant issues prior to an event.

Colin: For conference organizers, our advice is this: If you are planning an international event, plan for and, if possible, budget accordingly, to hire accredited International Sign interpreters. The WFD-WASLI list is public, and that represents the most qualified interpreters. We saw through this experience that there is a place for using nonaccredited interpreters, *if* there is sufficient support prior to and during an event. However, the risk is that many of them defaulted to using AS, so ensuring the nonaccredited interpreters have some training and have some international experience is helpful. So, work with a deaf-led interpreter coordinating team from the beginning of the planning process and accept their advice, as they will know how to make the event successful.

Abigail: For interpreters wanting to provide IS, our advice is this: to attend more international events. IS is evolving at a quick pace, and there are many different contexts as to where it is used. The formal style is used at events such as WFD, WFD Youth Section (WFDYS), EUD, EUDY, and so on, whereas the informal style is used in sports, Clin d’Oeil, and so on. Interpreters should be able to pick up various registers and speeds and be able to match the signers. This is best done when you assimilate yourself within the community. Accept bookings that you are suitable for. Recognize the importance of power relationships—do not monopolize bookings, especially if there is already a known issue between you and the client.

Deb: *What should I have asked you and I haven’t?*

Abigail: Perhaps a question about how we felt about the diversity of the interpreters and whether it has an influence on their performance. For example, in this situation, our preference was obviously LGBTIQ+ interpreters—but because we wanted qualified IS interpreters, we approached the accredited interpreters first. I think it would also be good to consider the idea of setting up, not necessarily working groups but, rather, specialized groups that people can go to for bookings. It would’ve been good if we could send a request to a group of LGBTIQ+ interpreters. Some interpreters did not understand or know LGBTIQ+ culture and used inappropriate signs—for example, one straight interpreter used gay penetrative sex for one sign. This is not to say that they were being intentionally offensive, but if it was a LGBTIQ+ interpreter, another choice of sign would have been used.

For future events, it would be ideal if prerecorded videos of the interpretation of each performance could be finalized and submitted to the host organization at least 2 weeks prior to the event. These videos could then be embedded on the “master” prerecorded video, which would alleviate a number of challenges which occurred because the interpreting was performed live. Consideration should be given to offering a variety of language caption options (such as French, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, Spanish) to enable everyone to enjoy the performances in their preferred language (particularly if they are not fluent in English)— this would not only benefit deaf and hard-of-hearing people but, more broadly, the wider audience.

Deb: *Thank you so much for taking time to speak with me and for your activism that brought the deaf world full access to Global Pride. What you pulled off in just days speaks to your amazing leadership at the international level and your ability to mobilize interpreters in the call of service.*

Colin and Abigail: Thank you so much for your interest.

Additional Reading

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