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Pamela Collins
Gallaudet University

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Recommended Citation
DOI: https://doi.org/10.34068/ijie.14.01.09
Available at: https://tigerprints.clemson.edu/ijie/vol14/iss1/9

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Shades of Us: 
The Need for Culturally Pluralistic Educational Tools and Practices in ASL-English Interpreter Education

Pamela F. Collins  
Gallaudet University

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to detail one professor’s use of storied experience as a strategy to engage and stimulate interpreting students. It also maps out a proposed dream project intended to move students past the confines of interpreting classrooms and toward an exploration of community that spans time.

Keywords: culturally responsive, cultural pluralism, storied experience, diversity, inclusion, experiential learning
1. Introduction

In the fall semester of 2020, as a third-year faculty member in the Department of Interpretation and Translation at Gallaudet University, I was assigned to teach my first graduate-level course, History of Interpreting (INT 701). The course was intended to map the trajectory of the emerging field of signed language interpreting by spotlighting milestones from 1800 to the 21st century. The prior syllabus contained this objective: "students undertake a discovery to understand how signed language interpreting and translation has evolved, as well as its relationship to the history of spoken language translation and interpreting."

Considering Bloom’s taxonomy (Armstrong, 2010), I noticed immediately that the course didn’t go beyond the first level of learning to “retrieve, recall or recognize relevant knowledge” to the advanced levels of evaluation, creation, and the ability “to put elements together to form a new coherent or functional whole” (p. 1). I also observed that “culturally pluralistic perspectives,” a phrase initially coined by philosopher Horace M. Kallen in 1915, was limited in the course design (Ratner, 1984, p. 185). For all its strengths, to my eye, the syllabus seemed slightly “color-less”—that is, the historical lived experiences of many people were not represented in the assignments. As one of two faculty of color in the department and the only Black faculty member, I was highly motivated to include “shades of color” by filling in the missing pages of those who have been absent from the history of the interpreting profession.

In this commentary, I describe how my own lived experiences as a Black individual shaped the philosophy I bring to interpreter education. I discuss my attempts to include more diverse voices in my courses. I share ideas and resources for implementing changes in interpreter education programs (IEPs). Finally, I conclude with my own dream of creating a culturally pluralistic video repository that could be used by IEPs.

2. My Formative Experiences

Perhaps the seeds planted by my parents, who came of age in a segregated America, taught me the importance of education as a tool. By promoting educational achievement, they pushed me to see beyond what is and gave me what I needed to create a world of possibilities. When faced with an obstacle, I used the pursuit of knowledge to light my path and the path of those around me. The metaphor of “lighting pathways” was one of the many gifts I received from my mother. When I was growing up, she methodically supplemented my public-school education by coloring in shades of experience through the diverse voices of such individuals as Sojourner Truth, Shirley Chisholm, Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Frederick Douglass, and a host of others. When I had questions, she continually pointed me to reference materials, such as encyclopedias of Black history. She also made things personal by proudly relating stories about successes within my own family. In addition, my well-traveled mother would encourage me to think more broadly with such statements as “You gotta get out of your zip code, Pam!” These early formative experiences (and many others) made me acutely aware of the incompleteness of the American narrative taught in public schools. That same gap also exists in IEPs, and when I became a faculty member, I was eager to guide students to gateways like those that were made available to me.

In many interpreting programs across the United States, students of color study in isolation. I was struck by this during two presentations in the Department of Interpretation and Translation. One Black graduate student’s research topic was titled “Same Degree, Different Story? Exploring the Experiences of Students of Color in Interpreting Programs.” The second research presentation given by an undergraduate student was titled “I’m Here—Where Are the Rest of Us?” These students’ work catapulted me back to my own academic isolation as a Black IEP student and my first semester as a Black faculty member. What became salient through the students’ presentations and upon reflection on my own journey is that students of color frequently speak about feeling supported, nurtured, and “brought up” in their home communities but unsupported in the mainstream academic community. Clearly, there is much work to be done.

This sense of isolation is felt in many ways, in the classroom and in the professional community. For example, marginalized communities may only be called upon to interpret for specific events, such as those held during Black History Month. However, those same interpreters are often not considered for nonspecialized events, such as a routine assignment on any given Monday at 2:00 p.m. As a result, my person-of-color colleagues have expressed feelings of
anger, frustration, and being devalued. The pattern is cyclical, and each time it occurs, it opens old wounds from scars still visible. Although I recognize and have researched this cyclical pattern of scheduling interpreters (Collins, 2020), I have even found myself venting, “I am not interested in cultivating relationships with individuals and/or agencies who only call me one month out of the year when they need me for a specialized request. I am building community partnerships with those who know me so well, they don't have to search for me in February—or any other day, for that matter.” My proposal in this paper is that interpreter educators can create a rich “12-month experience” for all interpreting students by integrating diversity across the entire program.

My reflections are woven into a larger collective story, which has become an integral part of my teaching philosophy. I believe that each one of us is the sum of every moment we've ever experienced with all the people we've ever known. I believe that these moments become part of our individual and collective history. Using this view, I argue that interpreter education instructors can incorporate these collective moments by creating space for them in the curricula. Historically, rich narratives by marginalized groups have been tucked away, off the beaten paths of academia, due to centuries of mistrust, harm, and communities' need to protect the stories of their past. Consider, for example, the story of the Black Wall Street, which was kept hidden from public consumption for more than 100 years. Similarly, Viola Fletcher, 107 years old, recently shared her experience of the Tulsa, Oklahoma, massacre at a hearing before the U.S. Congress, concluding her remarks by saying, “Our country may forget this history, but I will not.”

At this point in the article, you may be nodding your head in agreement, saying, “Yes, Pam, I get that we need change. But how?” I suggest that we make changes by consciously and thoughtfully gathering, preserving, and incorporating rich, storied experiences into our pedagogical approaches. Perhaps it is helpful to consider the metaphor of learning as a tunnel of wisdom, with educators mapping a pathway to knowledge. With respect and in partnership with learners, people's stories illuminate and light the way through the tunnel.

3. My Own Growth in Teaching

My introduction as a full-time faculty member in Gallaudet's program began by teaching two undergraduate foundational courses—Fundamentals of Interpreting (INT 325) and Discourse and Analysis: Field Experience I (INT 346). Both courses provided fertile ground needed to plant the seeds of my thinking about creating an inclusive classroom. Admittedly, in these early semesters, I barely scratched the surface with my efforts when I incorporated the tools and resources that I believed were missing in the classroom. Later, I moved beyond merely providing resources to employing more holistic approach of effective and sustainable strategies in the classroom. This change was reinforced by training I received at Gallaudet through a Multicultural Training Institute (MCTI), which helped me pivot past focusing solely on classroom resources and solidify my own teaching philosophy. I became anchored to the pedagogical frame of culturally responsive teaching, a concept advanced by Ladson-Billings (1995). I came to realize that it was not necessary to reinvent the educational wheel; rather, the goal of teaching and learning is to “read between the lines and connect beyond the pages” (Ladson-Billings, 1992, p. 312). That is, the aim is to connect students to a robust body of knowledge and experiences that already exist but have traditionally gone missing from the history books, thereby creating opportunities to produce new knowledge projects.

Being assigned to teach History of Interpreting finally provided the opportunity I needed to fashion a pluralistic view of history by using a culturally responsive frame. I assigned traditional texts as a springboard but incorporated new activities in which students explored narratives not captured in the pages of history. I guided students through an assignment in which they were instructed to answer three specific questions about the era being studied: (a) what was going on in the world during this era, (b) what was going on in the interpreting community (interposed by examining interpreting models during the era), and (c) whose voices were missing from the narrative? Students worked together to co-construct a historical timeline, develop an annotated bibliography, and select community guest speakers for the class based on their explorations. All their efforts culminated in a final research project called “The Missing Pages.” Ultimately, the students' stories traversed points along the total historical timeline based on their interests and, as a result, spotlighted marginalized communities by “writing in” the narratives they had collected.
The adaptation of a pedagogical approach rooted in plurality resulted in students’ curiosity and wonder at their points of discovery. Foregrounded in this learning was Adichie’s wise warning about the “danger of a single story” (2009, p. 85). Evident immediately was the value of beginning with one initial story that connected to another and another until, ultimately, unbounded by the classroom walls, students’ contributions merged with presenters, mentors, and community partners. Thus, in the course, we worked to cultivate multiple conversations spanning decades that would lead to historical revelations for the students. As Bloom (1956) would put it, we worked as a collective to create a “new, coherent, or functional whole” (Armstrong, 2010, p. 1).

In this section, I have briefly recounted my teaching experiences to document how my students (and I) grew and were shaped over time in an iterative process. In the next section, I offer five ideas for your consideration about how your own classrooms might evolve as well.

4. Creating Plurality in IEP Classrooms

The devastating social events of 2020 remind us that change is often borne of painful experiences. But such tragic experiences can also lead to hope. People across the globe are now more firmly planted in their rejection of the status quo of representation as established by educational, institutional, and governmental systems. A crucial societal transformation is the acknowledgment and inclusion of underrepresented minorities—that is, groups whose percentage of the population is lower than the population in the country. Inclusion means including people of color, members of various socioeconomic classes, persons who are LGBTQ, senior citizens, veterans, persons with intellectual and developmental disabilities, persons with mental illness, prisoners, persons with diverse gender identifications, and immigrants, among others.

As these changes transform societal systems, interpreter educators are also reexamining their systems. Programs are seeking ways to create plurality among their faculty and students and in their curricula, including diverse representation in guest lecturers, books and other readings, source language materials, course activities, admissions criteria, mentor selection and placement, and faculty lectures. The intentions are in place, but in what concrete ways can IEPs include individuals who historically have been underrepresented? What can individual interpreter educators do in their classrooms? How can community stakeholders be a part of this movement?

I offer five suggestions for ways to move forward with creating greater plurality in interpreter education classrooms and programs. Perhaps some of these ideas are already in the works within your programs, but I encourage us all to consider our specific dreams and how we can turn them into reality. My hope is that these ideas will provide you with a few seeds to cultivate your dreams for your programs.

Idea 1. Broaden and Fortify Your Current “People Links.”

I suspect that your program has developed a set of “people links”—that is, a list of individuals who regularly serve as guest lecturers, mentors, language coaches, and in other roles for students. However, this may be the time to revisit and reinvigorate your list of “regulars” to include individuals whose voices are rarely heard in your program. Some ideas of how to cultivate relationships with these individuals are provided below. Further, seek out opportunities to connect authentically through direct dialogue, informal mentoring, and, perhaps ultimately, co-creating a video repository (see my dream project below).

Idea 2. Seek Out, Create, and Incorporate Seminal Information in your Classrooms.

A rich body of information exists that can address questions that have gone unanswered within IEP programs. In this brief commentary, I can only scratch the surface of available resources, but I provide a sample of related literature (i.e., research-based, narratives, websites). In addition to resources, I encourage you to create opportunities for students to partner with others to create new resources that can be incorporated in your classrooms and shared with other educators. Below are a few samples of culturally pluralistic perspectives:

- Research: Persistence of African American/Black Signed Language Interpreters in the United States: The Importance of Culture and Capital by Erica West Oyedele (2015); Interpreting While Black by Folami Ford
• History: Black and Deaf in America by Ernst Harrison (1983); The Encyclopedia of Black History; Black Perspectives on the Deaf Community by Fuller et al. (2005)
• Linguistics: The Hidden Treasure of Black ASL by Carolyn McCaskill (2011)

Idea 3. Connect with Key Organizations.

Link with your local and national organizations to build a larger community of learning and practice. Teach students about authentic connections by modeling them through service-learning experiences with various organizations. Encourage students to engage in current, critical conversations taking place in the interpreting field. Have students volunteer with deaf community organizations. A few examples of organizations in the D.C. metropolitan area include but are not limited to the following:

• National Black Deaf Advocates (NBDA; https://www.nbda.org/)
• District of Columbia Area Black Deaf Advocates (DCABDA; https://www.nbda.org/local_chapters/district-of-columbia-area-black-deaf-advocates)
• The National Alliance of Black Interpreters - DC (NAOBI-DC; https://www.naobidc.org/)

You may also attend major conferences to connect with other interpreting faculty from other institutions. Finally, become familiar with existing programs and organizations in signed language interpreting that provide minority fellowships to pre- and postdoctoral trainees.

Idea 4. Use Local Resources to Build Partnerships.

In D.C., we are fortunate to have an array of museums and institutions to draw upon and with which create partnerships. I feel certain that each interpreting program has local resources as well. Here in D.C., a few that I call upon include:

• National Museum of African American History and Culture;
• Ford’s Theatre;
• Howard University (a historically Black college and university that is Gallaudet’s sister university);
• National Museum of the American Indian; and
• National Great Blacks in Wax Museum (Baltimore, MD).

Idea 5. Create a Passion Project to Address the Needs in the Classrooms and the Community.

The sky’s the limit on creating a passion project. Are you familiar with the concept of developer labs? Technology giants, such as Apple and others in Silicon Valley, use developer labs to provide up-and-coming information technology students with a platform to create their dream software or programs—“sandbox” to test their ideas. Gallaudet University is fortunate to offer similar opportunities through its Innovation and Entrepreneurship...
Collins

program. Students, interns, and individuals serving as apprentices can apply what they learn in classes, workshops, and training and use any gaps identified to develop new possibilities. Mentors and instructors guide the learning by using their wisdom and experience.

I’m sure that you are aware of the gaps that exist within the field of interpreter education—specifically, those around teaching and learning, training and application, and tools and resources. Perhaps you can be the one to create spaces, such as interpreter think tanks, TerpTrans labs that allow students to dream, design, and later disseminate a passion project that is their answer to what is missing in the field. In doing so, students join communities of practice and learning.

It is my hope that these five ideas may spur your imagination regarding the steps you can take as an interpreter educator to build on your vision of a more pluralistic classroom.

5. Shades of Us

In this section, I provide a brief description of my own dream project, tentatively titled “Shades of Us.” My dream is the creation of an oral and signed history archive that is designed to capture the shades of experience currently missing in interpreter education. I envision a video repository of storied experiences to showcase members across the globe. This proposed project will be designed to collect, preserve, and disseminate first-person narratives while simultaneously creating an electronic archive for the education of interpreting students in communities, schools, colleges, and universities across the United States. The vision is that the stories would represent people in the community as they go about their “everyday” lives, capturing their lived moments and reflections of milestones in their journeys.

The dream of “Shades of Us” is to create a resource/repository of diverse representation that will provide a resource for interpreting students to practice their craft with videos of everyday people who are living their authentic lives. This project will video-record interviews of first-person narratives with individuals whose lifework has had a positive and lasting impact on the community, as well as other narratives, gems that have been tucked away, waiting to be uncovered. In my effort to link novice interpreters to seasoned interpreters, I will collaborate with interpreting students and various members of the community, providing each partnership with the opportunity to link through direct dialogue (the interview process) and informal mentoring, which will ultimately result in a video record to be included in the dynamic video repository. I envision these videos as showcasing individual and collective histories, life lessons, and coming-of-age stories.

The mapping of the stages of the “Shades of Us” project is rooted in my long-time partnerships with Black and Brown members of the deaf community and the mutual trust developed over the last 24 years of my involvement. Although I am still in the early stages of musing, I envision my dream of a video repository as involving a four-stage approach:

Stage 1: Mapping the Goal in Community Partnership
The first stage of this project will be to establish a core team of community partners who will provide creativity, leadership, connections, and commitment to the “Shades of Us” project. Because it will be a collective experience by design, each participant will be connected to the project in a way that allows for the opportunity to contribute and benefit from others. Some connections may be long-standing, and others will be forged as the project develops. “Nothing about us without us,” a call for inclusion from marginalized communities, will serve as the underlying principle for this work.

Stage 2: Laying the Groundwork
The second stage will use each partner’s collective talents to determine the specifics of the project, answering such questions as “What is the ‘Shades of Us’ mission statement?” “What types of content will be housed on the video repository?” “How will the videos be collected and made available?” “What is our budget?” “What platform will be used to house the video repository?” and “Who will be the webmaster for the project? Will that be a paid position?”
**Stage 3: Funding the Project**

After the partners have determined the critical components of creating and sustaining the video repository, Stage 3 will involve funding the project. Grants are a critical method used to bring visibility to community-based initiatives and provide principal investigators the opportunity to design small- and large-scale projects. Other funding sources may be available through private donors, for-profit corporations, foundations, university funds, and not-for-profits, among others.

**Stage 4: Documenting and Disseminating**

As a small-scale project with large-scale possibilities, “Shades of Us” will be a documented experience used to connect students to language, culture, and community and to have those interviewed become a part of the historical context of interpreter training.

“Shades of Us” is my dream, and I’ve got my work cut out for me. In the end, my aim is to create and offer a valuable resource that all interpreting programs can use in their classrooms. I promise to keep you posted!

6. Conclusion—Beyond Knowing to Knowledge

In this commentary, I address the urgent need to transform our interpreter education classrooms into spaces of inclusion for the entire community. I briefly share my personal formative experiences, touch on my own journey as a faculty member, and suggest various ways to capture the rich diversity of language use (in terms of people and of where people live/work in their lives).

I suggest that such resources will be helpful in recruiting and retaining diverse students to interpreting programs as well as providing a resource for training in interpreting education programs and deaf organizations. Such tools can also promote interpreting as a viable career and create better understanding about the diaspora of individuals within the deaf and interpreting communities.

In closing, I suggest that we must speak when words are needed and share the silence when they are not to create a community of respect. To be clear, I do not support eliminating earlier documented history; rather, I suggest that we need to broaden historical perspectives by valuing knowledge that comes from experience. Indeed, it is only the sum of our parts as individuals that creates the inseparable whole of larger society. No matter what challenges may have driven us apart, we must find a way to use personal histories and cultural narratives to better understand one another.

**Acknowledgments**

Special thanks are due to Gallaudet University for supporting my goals to research and write about pluralistic interpreter education. I also give thanks to Dr. Brenda Nicodemus, who served as my mentor for this paper.

**References**


