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Working Conditions – Sharing the Vision

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As an interpreter educator I try to shape the future working conditions of interpreters. One way that I do this is by sharing my vision of how interpreting students can become working interpreters, then become certified interpreters, and then keep becoming better interpreters. The key factor is to instill this vision in interpreting students (as well as in working interpreters) so that it becomes a goal which constantly reminds us to fight to improve our working conditions. Parts of this vision are already reality in some places, but not everywhere... not yet, anyway.

1) People should only enter the field of professional interpreting with adequate training in language, culture, interpreting theory and ethics. This might be mandated by state law or by referral agency policies. In addition, the people who come out of interpreter training programs should be assigned to a mentor (or mentor pool) and should only work in teams with certified interpreters. This leads to the next point.

2) All interpreters should work only in teams except for those cases that can be justified to require only one interpreter. This means that all educational interpreting, all legal interpreting, and most other interpreting, should be done by teams of at least two interpreters, depending on the length and nature of the assignment. Good referral agencies already do this but it remains a rarity nationwide. Some situations may be best served by one interpreter, but most of our work could use the support of team members to ensure accuracy, clarity, consistency, and professional growth. Anyone who is serious about providing quality interpreting services has to ensure that interpreting assignments are performed by interpreting teams.

3) Interpreters working in teams should always be prepared to give constructive feedback. Prior to every interpreting job, the interpreting team should pre-conference with each other to discover their areas of concern for professional growth. One day it might be to focus on speaking volume, another day to focus on finger extensions. The essential element is that the team members agree ahead of time what areas to focus on. Perhaps the agreement is to note only positive things about each other just to keep up morale. Whatever the agreement, the team members should work to fulfil it honestly.

4) Interpreters should also agree on how to request feeding of missed information (or verification / clarification requests) as well as how to provide the feeding of this information. Interpreters should also discuss how the "B" interpreter feeds corrections to the "A" interpreter when the "A" interpreter is unaware of an error. These discussions are essential for the team to develop and maintain trust. It should actually reduce the stress of interpreting to know that your interpreter team members are participating in your interpretation.

5) Interpreting team members should continue to perform their assigned duties throughout the interpreting assignment. I remember a time when team interpreting meant "you read your book, then I'll read mine." I managed to pay bills, read magazine and journal articles, and sometimes just doodle during my "down time." After a few years I was introduced to the strange idea of the "B" interpreter actually monitoring both the source text and the interpretation product (target text). My interpreting life changed and so did my interpreting abilities and my understanding of the interpreting process. I see true team interpreting as the most significant opportunity for professional development. No matter how many workshops and conventions we attend, they will never improve our own skills as much as immediate and specific feedback from (and to) our interpreting team members. Students often ask me how to gain the skill required to become certified interpreters. I tell them to team interpret with certified interpreters. There is little else which can replace that experience.

6) Interpreting teams should always take the time to debrief each other, provide the personal feedback requested, share notes and discuss potential solutions to problems that cropped up during the assignment. Team members that do not debrief have wasted a valuable opportunity and cheated themselves of the chance to learn and improve. Classes and training sessions can only contribute a small portion to our professional development, we must depend on each other for continued, lifelong improvement.

My students practice these six areas in the classes I teach. I want the next generation of interpreters to be comfortable with these working conditions and to expect them. One day the concept of solo interpreting will be as foreign as the idea of "down time" is becoming today.