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EMPOWERING DEAF CONSUMERS THROUGH THE USE OF DEAF AND HEARING INTERPRETER TEAMS

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Introduction

Deaf people have been serving as informal “interpreters” for other Deaf people for as long as Deaf people have had a community. There has been a system of reciprocity over the years that has enabled Deaf people to contribute to the community and in turn receive benefit from other members. Deaf people know other Deaf people to go to for assistance in translating written correspondence into American Sign Language (ASL). They may ask a classmate for clarification of what a hearing teacher said or signed. A Deaf club member asks another Deaf club member to clarify what just happened in the business meeting. In an overcrowded room, one Deaf person will copy the signs of the group leader for those unable to see. The Deaf people in the community with the knowledge and expertise to translate, to clarify, or to paraphrase are called upon to share that skill and knowledge with other members of the community (Mindess, 1999, p. 88).

The Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf began to initially recognize the unique skill sets that a Deaf person can bring to the profession in 1972 with the establishment of the Reverse Skills Certificate (RSC). Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) describes those who possess this certification as:

Holders of this full certificate have demonstrated the ability to interpret between American Sign Language (ASL) and English-based sign language or transliterate between spoken English and a signed code for English. Holders of this certificate are deaf or hard-of-hearing and interpretation/transliteration is rendered in ASL, spoken English and a signed code for English or written English. Holders of the RSC are recommended for a broad range of interpreting

assignments where the use of an interpreter who is deaf or hard-of-hearing would be beneficial. (RID, 2001, p. 5)

The RSC was a modified version of the Comprehensive Skills Certificate (CSC). The exam was not specifically developed with a Deaf interpreter in mind but was adapted from the evaluation given to hearing interpreters. Originally, holders of the RSC used this certification to serve as an evaluator for the RID National Testing System. They comprised part of the live evaluation team used to assess an interpreter's skill for partial or full certification.

With the establishment of the RSC, Deaf people were more involved in the certification of interpreters and in the interpreting field itself. What was traditionally done in an informal manner within the Deaf community began to have value in a professional sense. Deaf people began to accompany hearing interpreters on challenging assignments. The hearing interpreter processes the spoken communication and interprets that for the Deaf interpreter. The Deaf interpreter in turn transmits that information to the Deaf consumer in a manner that is most readily understood. Likewise, when the Deaf consumer conveys a message, the Deaf interpreter signs it to the hearing interpreter in manner which enables the hearing interpreter to voice the message to the hearing consumer. As the benefit of this team approach began to be recognized, there was the realization that there needed to be a certification tool that reliably tested what it is that the profession was expecting a Deaf interpreter to do.

In 1988, RID suspended the awarding of the RSC and later initiated the Certified Deaf Interpreter: Provisional certification (CDI-P). Holders of this certificate were required to document specific types of training. This provisional certification was implemented as a temporary means of obtaining credentials to serve as a Deaf interpreter while a new evaluation system was developed. When the current Certified Deaf Interpreter (CDI) certification was developed by RID, the CDI-P was phased out. There are currently 57 CDIs who hold this certificate from RID. The updated standards read as follows:

Holders of this certification (CDI) are interpreters who are deaf or hard-of-hearing, and who have completed at least eight hours of training on the NAD-RID Code of Professional Conduct; eight hours of training on the role and function of an

interpreter who is deaf or hard-of-hearing; and have passed a comprehensive combination of written and performance tests. Holders of this certificate are recommended for a broad range of assignments where an interpreter who is deaf or hard-of-hearing would be beneficial. (RID, 2001, p. 7)

A CDI primarily works as a member of team with a hearing interpreter, can work alone, or with a team of multiple interpreters. The training and expertise of a CDI ensures that the interpreter(s) has knowledge and skills in professional best practices, the interpreting process, Deaf culture, and linguistic principles of ASL and English (RID, 2001, p. 17). As a person who has lived the Deaf experience, has similar cultural experiences and language base as the Deaf consumer, the CDI brings a unique perspective and expertise to the team process of working with a hearing interpreter. CDIs are active participants in the community of the consumers to whom they serve (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 1996).

In the Deaf community, ASL is the primary communication mode and English is the secondary communication mode. Within the community, Deaf people understand each other 90 to 100% of the time. Outside of the community, when interacting with hearing people, Deaf people get fragmented information even with the use of a hearing interpreter. Fragmented information tends to be between 50 and 70% of the information that is being transmitted. Many hearing interpreters are second language ASL users which make it a challenge for them to search for equivalents between the two languages of ASL and English or whatever spoken or written language is being used. For a CDI, ASL is their native or primary language and they are more able to identify with how other Deaf people process information and how to make the concept visual, (Kannapell, 1982).

The settings in which a CDI and hearing interpreter can work as a team are limitless. Examples of settings are legal, medical, performing arts, educational, vocational rehabilitation, social services, mental health, trainings, conferences, and interpreting for deaf-blind consumers. The typical consumer that is considered to be able to benefit from a Deaf and hearing interpreter team, is a Deaf consumer with limited language skills in ASL and/or English, uses a non-standard signing system (home signs), has fragmented life experience, is undereducated, perhaps a user of a foreign signed language, has developmental issues, or may be deaf-blind. These

consumers can benefit tremendously from a Deaf and hearing interpreter team but they are not the only consumers who can benefit. Any Deaf consumer can benefit from a Deaf and hearing team. The Deaf consumer is able to receive the communication from another Deaf person in linguistically correct ASL and therefore, has to do less mental processing and “reinterpreting” in order to understand. They can just take it all in with less conscious effort. Also, deaf consumers who use signs that are particular to a given age group, geographic location, or ethnic group may be better served by a team approach. In addition, a Deaf consumer may have characteristics reflective of Deaf Culture not experienced by hearing interpreters or consumers but that the CDI would be familiar with as a member of the same cultural group (Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf, 1996). Not only do Deaf consumers benefit from the Deaf and hearing interpreter team, so do the hearing consumers. They can be more assured that the communication is being conveyed accurately and that misunderstandings or miscommunication is minimized.

The use of a team approach may be more cost effective. Even though two interpreters are being utilized, the actual time spent in meetings may be reduced. In addition, there are professions in which it is expected for practitioners to specialize, i.e. medical, legal, performing arts. A CDI is an interpreter who specializes in a particular Deaf clientele or in a unique communication process. If the interpreting profession begins to use this terminology of specialization, it may be more accepted by the hearing and deaf consumers and the perceived additional cost might be justified.

The presence of a CDI can also affect the Deaf consumer’s perception of an interpreted situation. Traditionally, in an interpreted meeting, there is one Deaf consumer with one or more hearing consumers and a hearing interpreter. Because the Deaf community has historically been an oppressed minority, this can be perceived as a “two against one” or “four against one” on the part of the Deaf consumer. The Deaf consumer may feel overwhelmed and react by say little or nothing, respond by nodding the head regardless of level of understanding, may be unable to think clearly, and may react passively or defensively. By involving a CDI, not only does the CDI bring interpreting expertise but also alters the Deaf consumers perception by seeing an “ally” and someone who is like him/her. Deaf consumers are more likely to express themselves through a CDI, feel a connection with the CDI, and feel less intimidated.

There are also times that a CDI can be utilized by Deaf or hearing professionals who sign and who work with Deaf consumers without the presence of a hearing interpreter. These professionals may not have the comprehensive communication skills required to work with particular Deaf consumers and may feel that they have limited understanding of the Deaf Community or Deaf Culture. Some professionals may also want to focus on their specialty without focusing so much attention on communication. For example, a mental health counselor may want to focus on the counseling and observation aspect of a session and let the CDI focus on the communication issues. Some professionals may want to have a CDI interpret written text in the Deaf consumer's language mode. Also, a CDI may be used to interpret for Deaf/Blind consumers who are meeting with either a Deaf or hearing professional (Solow, 1981).

There are some situations in which a CDI can be an interpreter independent of the hearing interpreter. An example would be interpreting a written test, i.e., the multiple-choice exam required by the Department of Motor Vehicles to obtain a driver's permit. These tests tend to be computer-based and a CDI could serve as the interpreter of the multiple choice questions which are especially challenging English-based questions to interpret into ASL. A CDI could be used to interpret any type of written test for which an interpreter is allowed to translate the English questions into ASL.

How is it determined that a CDI is a viable interpreting option? Generally, hearing interpreters who face interpreting assignments in which they feel that a CDI would be beneficial assist with the determination. The hearing interpreter can and should make a request for a team if the Deaf consumer does not know they have that option. Many Deaf consumers do not realize that there are Deaf interpreters available and are not familiar with the process to obtain one. Many hearing consumers are also not aware of the availability or benefit of Deaf interpreters. The hearing interpreter must be able to put ego aside and realize the benefits of a Deaf team member. Using a CDI is not a reflection of the hearing interpreter's skill, training, or experience. It is a simple recognition of what a team approach can bring to the interpreting situation. Hearing interpreters have become accustomed to working with other hearing interpreters in teams but it is a newer and underutilized concept to team with a Deaf interpreter.

In any interpreting situation, but especially with a Deaf and hearing interpreting team situation, a "Deaf friendly" and a visually sensitive

environment must be established and maintained. The Deaf consumer must clearly be able to see all the individuals in the room, know who is talking, be able to see any visual aids, and be able to see the speaker's actions, facial expressions, and gestures. The interpreters work together with the hearing consumers to ensure that whoever speaks identifies him/herself, that only one person talks at a time, that the Deaf person is following all of the communication, that the Deaf person's responses are "heard" by others, the speaker waits for the Deaf person to read any visual aids used before proceeding, and that the Deaf person feels comfortable and not intimidated. Deaf consumers should be asked their preference as to where the interpreters are situated, where they want to sit, and where the hearing consumer(s) should be. The interpreters and other consumers can make suggestions but try to accommodate the Deaf consumer's desires. Consideration should be also be given for lighting, number of people in the room, people who sign for themselves, the goal of the sessions, possible confusion/misunderstandings, and the language skills of the Deaf consumer.

The utilization of Deaf and hearing interpreter teams provides a more level playing field for Deaf consumers. When a CDI is paired with a hearing interpreter, Deaf consumers are more likely to express themselves, ask questions, and understand the communication. As in any interpreting situation, there are times that communication is still limited due to a variety of factors, which may not be entirely overcome. But the Deaf and hearing interpreter team can maximize on the communication that is possible and necessary in order to have a successful communication experience. The interpreting profession is beginning to embrace the use of Deaf interpreters in a limited way but the benefits of working as a team with hearing interpreters can go a long way in empowering Deaf consumers as well as promote a successful communication experience for all persons involved.

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