

Growing Allies Through Rapport-Building

By Cheryl Fielitz

DISCLAIMER: This article focuses on what we do as interpreters. As a practitioner who actively tries to work within the Social Justice model of our work, I recognize that it is often appropriate to include Deaf students in discussions about classroom access--or have them lead those discussions. I also feel that there is value to connecting with hearing stakeholders on a professional level. I believe we can do that by talking about our professional needs in a way that doesn't cross the line of "speaking for" the Deaf student--or all Deaf people. That professional relationship is what I will discuss in the following article. That being said...read on!

The skills required to become an interpreter are so complex, there is little time to focus on soft-skills as we go through our ITPs/IEPs. However, when it comes to connecting to hearing folks and growing allies, these skills are invaluable. In the educational field, where our working relationships can last anywhere from a semester to a year or two, rapport-building becomes even more important to ensure a successful and enjoyable experience for all involved. I would like to share some of the strategies I have learned through collaboration with colleagues and my own trial-and-error throughout my 15-ish years as an educational interpreter.

Be professional

This may seem obvious, however, for many interpreters, we were trained to be "just the interpreter"; we were taught that the hallmark of a job well done was the fact that everyone forgot that we were there. While the purpose of this philosophy was to ensure the communication act proceeded as seamlessly as possible, I believe this lingering attitude of "just the interpreter" can affect how we come into the classroom.

- *Introduce Yourself.* Preferably before the first day of class. No matter what educational level you are working at, the first day of class is an incredibly stressful, chaotic time. Introducing yourself and talking about what you need to do your job in the midst of the first-day whirlwind is almost guaranteeing a less than positive first impression.

At the U of MN, we noticed this problem and came up with what we call Instructor Letters ([see sample letter here](#)) to ameliorate some of that first-day stress. As soon as we have interpreters assigned to classes, we email letters to the professors/instructors of each class and lab letting them know that there will be an interpreter in their classroom for the semester. (These letters are all about our professional needs and general classroom access...nothing about the specific student and their needs. Because we are at the post-secondary level, we let the student disclose all that.) The difference these letters have made in making the first day of class run more smoothly for us (and in turn for our consumers) is amazing!

- *Show up on time...*which is actually early. IF you are late (which may happen...we are all human), remember to recognize that your late arrival is a disruption (no matter how small) to not just the learning of the Deaf student, but to everyone in the classroom, and apologize (in person or in an email). If you need to sneak out early (leaving your team to interpret), inform the instructor ahead of time so she isn't surprised.

- *Think about the language you use.* We teach people how to treat us. In my experience, when introducing myself and my role, one word has made a world of difference. I say “Hi, my name is Cheryl and I am an ASL interpreter. I will be working WITH you this semester.” With. One simple word that establishes the instructor and I as a team working together to educate students in an accessible manner. Pretty powerful stuff.

We do this every day...they don't

Years ago, when I was planning my wedding, the coordinator at the venue we were using seemed to answer all of my thousands of questions quite dismissively and with an air of “Of COURSE...that's obvious.” I used to complain to my partner, “I mean, I'm sure she has planned hundreds of weddings, but this is MY first one!” Her attitude made me feel small and kind of stupid...and less likely to ask more questions. That lesson has stuck with me all these years and influences how I interact with hearing stakeholders.

- *Be patient.* This is our everyday work. We have degrees in this field. We have passion for this field. For the vast majority of us this is more than a job. It is easy to become impatient and irritable when we see microaggressions and inequities coming from an instructor who just doesn't seem to “get it”. So before we explain for what feels like the millionth time just WHY YouTube auto-captions are not an acceptable and reliable method for making your classroom accessible, we need to take a deep breath and remember...this is the first time this particular instructor has asked.
- *Offer resources.* Again, we have the knowledge in this field. After talking with a professor about captioning their videos, follow up with an email (thanking them for their time) and include links to YouTube captioning tutorials, Amara.com, or even a captioned version you found during a quick Google search. Is there someone else in the school or department who worked particularly well with Deaf students in the past and is an ally? Offer to introduce them for a colleague-to-colleague chat (with permission, of course). Mention successful strategies you've seen used in the past. If we want to work as a team with our hearing stakeholders, we need to lead the way in making access less work than it may initially seem.
- *Be prepared to break things down without condescending.* I can't emphasize this enough: What is obvious to us is most likely not obvious to folks who are new to this process. With the possible exception of CODAs, most of us have a memory of what it was like when we were new to Deaf culture and everything that goes with it. Do you remember how overwhelming and foreign it seemed? I sure do. I get it that I may have to say things like “listening with their eyes” to drive the point home to a person who can't fathom not having auditory access. I may have to explicitly say, “If a Deaf person's eyes are reading the powerpoint, then they are not looking at me to see what you are saying. And if they are looking at me to ‘hear’ you, then they are missing what is on the screen.” Tedious? Sometimes. Worth the “aha” moment it can trigger? Absolutely.
- *Remember the hearing students in the room as well.* They can also become allies. Say hello to them. Be polite if you need to ask them to move. When the Deaf student partners up with a hearing student and that hearing student seems a little weirded out by the adult who is all of a sudden pulling up a chair behind them, say (sim-com) quickly, “Hi...do you mind if I sit here so I can interpret for the both of you? Thanks.” Interpreters are not invisible...let's not act like we are.

Praise the positive; depersonalize the negative

Comb through popular articles on shaping the behavior of anyone from your child, to your poodle, to your spouse, and you will often find advice that says catching Junior, Fifi, or Dear One doing

something well is waaay more productive than catching them doing something not-so-well. I believe this strategy will work just as well in Ms. Smith's third period Algebra.

- *Depersonalize the negative.* No one likes to be told they are doing something wrong. While we are a part of a team with our instructors to serve the needs of the Deaf student(s), we need to be aware that they have a responsibility to fulfill the needs of all their students, not just the one or two we may work with. Access may not always be in the front of their mind--and that's OK. If something isn't working well, try to find a time to discuss it when both of you can be present (NOT right after class when there is a line of students trying to get in one last question about next week's midterm). Schedule a time that works with both of you and try to approach the issue by focusing on the process, not the person. Consider these two opening statements:

I really need to talk to you about discussion in class. You need to wait before you call on people to answer your questions. You are going too quickly and not allowing the Deaf student to participate.

Hi, thanks for taking the time to chat. I want to brainstorm solutions for your weekly class discussions. Although what I do is called simultaneous interpreting, the process is not perfect. Because I need to listen to what you are saying, translate it into ASL, and then sign it, the interpretation is always a bit behind whoever is doing the speaking. (You may have noticed the Deaf student sometimes reacts to jokes a little bit after everyone else. That's because of what we call processing time.) Processing time is always most noticeable during group discussions. By the time I catch up to the question and get it interpreted, often other students have answered and the discussion has moved along. Because of the interpreting process, it is often a challenge for Deaf students to participate in classroom discussions.

Which statement seems like it would lead to a richer discussion? Lead to a collaborative approach to problem solving? Let you get your professional needs met (which will lead to more access), while letting the instructor have agency in their classroom and implement a solution that fits their style? Teaches a bit about the "behind the scenes" of our work so maybe they can anticipate a challenge and address it themselves next time?

- *Personalize the positive.* And when something good happens in the classroom? Totally make it about them! Without gushing, point out what went well and thank them for their role in it (either in person or an email). Perhaps they made a conscious decision or have an intuitive way of presenting information that is especially Deaf-friendly. Either way, drawing attention to the behavior is a great way of recognizing, reinforcing, and (hopefully) causing repetition of the action.

Say, I just wanted to mention that I appreciate the way you give your students a minute to read your slides before you start lecturing. I'm not sure you are aware, but that is actually a Deaf-friendly approach to lecturing; it eliminates forcing the Deaf student to choose between reading the slide and looking at the interpreter to get your comments. Thanks so much!

You know, I just wanted to take a minute and thank you for choosing not to show that video today when the captioning wasn't working. It really showed that you value the experience and access of everyone in your classroom. Unfortunately, as an interpreter, I don't often see instructors making that decision, so I just wanted to tell you that it mattered.

Hopefully comments like this will stick with your instructors and influence their decisions the next time they have a Deaf student in their classroom.

As much as we try to explain our role to hearing folks, to the uninitiated, we often represent the Deaf person on some level. And, for hearing folks who are working with a Deaf student for the first time, one Deaf person can represent ALL Deaf people. Therefore, one rocky relationship with a classroom interpreter can easily lead to “Deaf students are a pain in my classroom.” This is one of the many reasons I feel it is vital that we are able to cultivate positive professional relationships with the instructors with whom we work. After all, the goal for all of us is the best education possible for EVERY student, right?

Thoughts? Other tips or tricks? I would love to hear them!



Cheryl received her BA in Communication Studies from Winona State University and completed the ITP at St. Paul College in 2001. In the years since, she has been primarily an educational interpreter, working in K-12 in the beginning of her career, and spending the last 11 years at the University of Minnesota. (She has also worked in VRS and performing arts.) She loves this field and the community that comes along with it. She is excited to be included in this great resource!

