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The Skill Gap: Is Mentoring the Answer?

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Over the past three days, we have talked a great deal about the standards and program components which are needed to offer quality Interpreter Preparation Programs (IPPs) to prospective interpreters. We hope this education will prepare graduates to enter the working world of interpreters ready to provide a quality service in a professional manner. What we often find, however, is that there is a great gap between the IPP graduate of today and the qualified working interpreter. This gap can be measured by the number of years needed between IPP graduation and RID certification, the field's defined minimum competency standard. Further, upon graduation, some of these students are not able to pass more than the most basic level of a state assessment or screening where those instruments are used. This indicates that often novice interpreters are working without appropriate skills, wreaking havoc on our professional standards and demoralizing our new generation of interpreters. As a remedy for this situation, some have proposed that mentoring programs be established.

This raises several questions for me such as: Why does this gap exist in the first place and what can we do about it? What is mentoring and is that the solution? Is this gap caused by a lack of quality in our programs-poor standards- or is there something structural lacking in our post-IPP programming? Where does mentoring fit in solving these problems?

In this paper, I will explore these questions and share some of my thoughts with you. I'll begin with a brief look at the skill gap and what I think can and ought to be addressed in post-IPP education. I will then define mentoring and explore its application both in other fields and in our own. Finally, I will examine a few options for addressing the skill gap, and conclude with some proposals for post-IPP professional development.

I first became interested in this topic because as a project director of a federally funded regional interpreter education project I work with both preservice and post-IPP graduate programming. Although these appear to be separate tasks to me, I often receive requests in which it seems that the activities are combined. Specifically, I have received requests for programs in language development as well as language enhancement, in development of interpreting skill as well as refinement of interpreting skill, in basic cultural and cross-cultural issues as well as in matters of cultural complexity. In addition, requests have been made for workshops in general business matters and dealing with decision-making and ethics in the field. All ofthese topics need to be addressed. The question for me is where and how. Traditionally, our field has relied on "the workshop" as the basic vehicle for education. With the advent and proliferation of programs, this has been somewhat ameliorated. Yet, major gaps are still often first addressed through extracurricular or post- IPP activities. This may not be the best approach.

It is my belief that the development of language skills in both ASL and English and the acquisition of cultural knowledge of both Deaf and non-Deaf communities should occur prior to entrance into an IPP. Instruction in interpreting theory, development of basic interpreting skills, and expansion of language and cultural knowledge should occur within IPPs. Refinement of these skills, expansion of fields of knowledge, and practical application of both interpreting and business skills are appropriate post-IPP topics. Some of these might be addressed through professional development workshops and seminars. Others, however, involve the on-the-job integration of knowledge and skills. These are experience-based activities which do not fully translate to the classroom environment. These are the issues generally considered appropriate for "mentoring" programs, but are they?

Before we can answer that question, we must have a definition for mentoring. Having been fortunate enough to have had some terrific mentors along the way, I would like to share my idea of mentoring with you through an example from outside the interpreting field.

As a young teacher of "reluctant learners" (i.e. students on the verge of dropping out of schoo!), I took a job in a small alternative education program. I was hired as a new teacher to replace an extremely popular teacher who had been fired in a political move. I found myself placed within a tightly knit teaching unit that had been sorely disappointed by the outside administration of the program, and with students who had recently lost a valued ally. Not surprisingly, I was greeted with hostility by both staff and students. Yet quite from the start, the on-site director of the program decided to take me under her

wing and bring me into the group. She served as my protector by publicly giving me her support. She provided the shelter of her credibility which allowed me the space to prove myself and possibly win the trust of the others. She counseled me when the students were more than I could handle and she spent time talking to me about my goals. She also observed me and noticed my interest and aptitude for administration. She actively worked with me, "showed me the ropes," and groomed me to take her place the following year when she planned to leave her position. Unfortunately, the program lost its funding and...we all left! Still, through that experience, I learned a great deal about teaching, kids, professionalism, leadership, and mentoring.
As years have gone by, our paths have rarely crossed professionally; I moved into deaf education and later interpreting and she remained in "hearing" education, as it were. Still, she has continued to play an important advisory role in my development. At interesting points in my career, I have called her, talked over options and gotten her advice. Through her investment of time and energy in me, I have grown significantly.

This image formed the basis of my definition of mentoring. However, in talking with several persons proposing "mentoring" programs, I found varying views and decided to research further. This led me to two definitions from diverse disciplines. In Michael G. Zey's book, *The Mentor Connection*, which focuses on the mentor relationship in business, a mentor was defined as "a person who oversees the career and development of another person, usually a junior through teaching, counseling, providing psychological support, protecting and at times promoting or sponsoring."**(l)** In the field of education, I found Effective Teaching and Mentoring by Laurent Daloz who defined a mentor as "one who engenders trust, issues a challenge, provides encouragement and offers a vision."**(2)** Both of these definitions were congruent with mine so I turned to explore the literature of our field.
Unfortunately, in spite of Linda Siple's work in this area, I was unable to locate any written materials from our field on mentoring 12m:~. I did, however, discover within the Interpreters on Interpreting series produced by Sign Media, Inc. a videotape entitled "Mentoring." It featured four wellknown interpreters addressing the issue of mentoring through a panel discussion moderated by Lou Fant and Sharon Neumann Solow. A sampling of their comments provided insight into our field's definition of mentoring.

Alan Champion, for example, commented that a mentor was a "wise and faithful counselor."**(3)** Anna Witter-Merithew stated that mentoring was "a deliberate, a conscious investment that is being made and sometimes ...even formalized in an agreement."**(4)** Janice Hawkins replied to a question concerning what she looked for in a mentor by saying, "I look for someone who is beyond where I would see myself, as someone who can assist in helping me move along that process."**(5)**

All of these ideas of mentoring seemed to present a similar definition so I decided to explore what the concept would mean practically. Michael Zey identified a number of mentoring activities and organized them into an hierarchy described as follows:**(6)**

Level IV - *Sponsoring*
Promotions

Level III - *Organizational Intervention*
Protection
Marketing
Access to Resources

Level II - *Counseling*
Support
Confidence building
Assistance with personal/professional life conflicts

Level I - *Teaching*
Information
Drawing the organizational road map
Career guidance

In Level I, the mentor is involved primarily in providing information and guiding the protege into the profession. The main investment of the mentor is time. In Level II, the mentor becomes more involved with the protege through the provision of emotional and psychological support. The mentor is now investing not only time but also emotion as s/he tries to help the protege handle the inevitable confidence issues which arise as well as issues of balance between professional growth and personal/family responsibilities. In Level III, the mentor invests her/his professional reputation by giving the protege her/his "stamp of approval." The mentor is active in marketing the protege's skills and orchestrating the proverbial spotlight to shine on the protege. The mentor may help the protege gain access to organizational resources, protect her/him from various types of political fallout or introduce her/him to key persons who can share knowledge or offer new opportunities. This can open many doors for the protege and can lead to the highest level of mentors hip, according to Zey, Level IV: Sponsorship. There the mentor may promote the protege to a new position or nominate his/her work for sponsorship by foundations. This is a powerful position for both mentor and protege.

If we look back on the example of my mentor, we can see that she supported me through all these levels. At Level I, my

mentor listened to my goals, guided me in that direction, and taught me the gist of the organization. She didn't teach me how to teach, although she did make suggestions or offer resources from time to time. At Level II, she counseled me as to my problems with students and supported my efforts which gave me confidence. She didn't get involved in my personal dramas which were unrelated to work. She also provided Level.III support nearly immediately by providing protection and highlighting my qualities with staff and students. She had planned to provide Level IV sponsorship but was unable to due to circumstances. In all, she provided all these levels of mentoring in a fluid manner, not following a rigid step-by-step or level-by-level approach. Often she provided different levels of men to ring concurrently. Like any quality mentoring relationship, it took on a rhythm of its own and followed the needs of the protege and the strengths of the mentor.

This same type of mentoring can, and often does, occur in the interpreting profession. For example, in Level I mentoring, an interpreter mentor would focus on teaching an interpreter protege the "who's who" of the field and how to get along within the local system. The interpreter mentor might also observe specific skill weaknesses of the interpreter protege and either provide some low key tutorial services or direct the protege to an appropriate resource to obtain these skills. With regard to business practices, the mentor might share her/his bookkeeping systems and pass on references of appropriate personnel such as accountants and physical therapists. In addition, the protege might use this opportunity to conduct informal discussions with the mentor about day-to-day concerns and ethical considerations or perceived role conflicts and ways to manage them.

At Level II, the mentor might become more involved personally with the protege by helping the protege strike a comfortable balance between work! community responsibilities and home/ family/personal responsibilities. This balancing act might raise more cultural issues and questions which the mentor as guide and nurturing support person would help the protege resolve. Further, the mentor might be the best person to provide a balanced, yet supportive, view of the protege's skill level. The mentor could counsel the protege toward appropriate assignments and encourage the protege to stretch her/himself without overstepping her/his limits.

At Level III, mentors could help market proteges by suggesting them for specific work or requesting to team with them. Proteges could be accompanied to organizational events and introduced to key people within organizations. The strengths of a protege could be mentioned to people in positions of power who would be able to utilize those skills and expand a protege's work base. At Level IV, proteges could be introduced into the organization on a local, regional or national basis. Proteges could also be nominated for national office or recommended for research grants or writing projects. In this way, the organization could be revitalized by "new blood" and local talent could be brought into the national spotlight. This view of the mentoring hierarchy as it relates to interpreting can be summarized as shown in the chart below.

Notice though, that in this hierarchy of mentoring, teaching is at the lowest level. This is not because information or skills are not important, but because these do not provide the basis of mentorship. Many people teach. In fact, many serve as role models and participate in the growth of juniors. These activities alone are not mentorship.

The Hierarchy of Mentoring As Applied to Interpreting

Level IV - *Sponsoring*
If staff, recommend promotion
Nominate for regional/national organizational positions
Encourage further research publications
Recommend for higher positions as desirable

Level III - *Organizational Intervention*
Advise concerning complex political and cultural dilemmas
Help to market protege/Suggest for appropriate staff positions
Introduce into organizations/ Recommend for positions

Level II - *Counseling*
Support at public events
Advise how to handle schedule and how to manage professional/ personal time conflicts
Counsel with cultural conflicts
Provide pep talks and support, as needed

Level I - *Teaching*
Give feedback from observation and/or work together
Explain about political events and implications
Inform as to "who's who"
Provide tips on business aspects
Advise on what to focus/where and how to specialize (or not)

Mentorship is the confluence of these activities; the one-to-one acknowledged relationship between a senior and a junior where there is an investment of time, energy and commitment by both parties toward the growth of a protege. This relationship involves a certain amount of personal chemistry, a meshing of personalities, dreams and hopes. The mentor provides the

guiding force, "alternately protecting his charge from threat, urging him on, explaining the mysteries, pointing the way, leaving him alone, translating arcane codes, calming marauding beasts, clearing away obstacles, and encouraging-always encouraging"(7) while the protege, for his/her part agrees to commit to this path and move through it until the relationship no longer serves them both. It is a powerful relationship and offers significant benefits to all involved.

For mentors, these are numerous. Mentors can not only enjoy seeing their own discoveries passed on and expanded by others, they can also have the satisfaction of knowing that their mistakes will be avoided. New pitfalls may be uncovered but together, combining experience with freshness, new resolutions can be found. Mentors can gain new insights into their growing, changing professional world through contact with these newer initiates. Further, mentors can be personally enriched because growth in another always inspires growth in ourselves. Taking pride in the accomplishments of the protege can bring a sense of fulfillment as Janice Hawkins describes "the excitement [of] seeing them go off and go on in the field and do real exciting things. There are a number of people I'm extremely proud of the things that they have done and the accomplishments they've had and really think back to my role, a small role perhaps, in that life; and how neat that is."(8)

This may sometimes put the mentor in the role of"starmaker" which is a powerful position. Occasionally mentors become enamored with this role and move from the healthy route of a senior encouraging a junior to the unhealthy one of a guru gathering a power base of disciples. This is not an inevitable situation and need not be an obstacle to mentoring. In fact, these situations can often be avoided by direct feedback from colleagues and honest soul searching on the part of both mentor and protege.

Meanwhile, the protege is most obviously the one enjoying the fruits of mentors hip. First of all, the protege receives one-toone attention from a senior professional in the field. The protege also benefits directly from the knowledge and experience of the mentor. The protege may receive quality career guidance with the mentor showing herlhim career options which s/he may never have considered. Finally, and perhaps most importantly in our field of private practitioners, knowing that "someone is looking out" for the protege will increase her/his sense of safety and membership in the group, or the profession. Through this experience, the protege could gain a sense of belonging to the profession.

This leads to obvious advantages for the organization. If newer members of the profession feel welcomed and supported, most likely they will continue in the field. This should ease attrition and enable the organization to stabilize and grow. The investment of knowledge and experience into newer members should increase the general skill level within the organization. More direct communication and relationships between seniors and juniors would improve organizational communication and open the organization to growth through new ideas and perspectives. This increased connection between proteges and mentors would both improve morale and increase commitment.

Thus, the benefits of mentoring can be summarized as follows:(9)

To the Protege
Individualized attention
Knowledge
Career guidance
Nurturance
Sense of belonging to the field

To the Mentor
Cause of pride when protege does well
Satisfaction that protege will benefit from mentor's mistakes
Feeling of continuity of mentor's own work

To the Organization
Integration of individual to the organization
Reduction in attrition
Improved organizational communication
Increased skill level due to guidance
Increased commitment to organization

Now, this is my view of mentoring. It might not be the one you had in your mind when you began reading. I can assure you it wasn't what the novice interpreters and workshop requesters had in mind either when they began calling me about establishing "mentoring" programs. What they had envisioned was summarized by Virginia Hughes when she said, "Mentoring to me means a senior interpreter taking a junior interpreter on the job and we share the job."(I0) A good example of this type of program was a program run in New York City in Spring 1990 entitled, "Interpreter Skill Development through Mentoring" cosponsored by N ew York City Metro RID and the Northeastern University Interpreter Education Project. This was an individualized skill-building program which paired nine senior interpreters with nine junior interpreters over a ten-week period. During that time, the interpreter pairs met in the interpreting lab and/or at on-the-job situations where the senior interpreter would observe the junior interpreter and provide feedback and basic instruction. Four group lab sessions were also included, focusing on skill weaknesses displayed by most of the junior interpreters. An article describing this program more completely is

available from the seminar co-coordinators, Bill Moody and Bonnie Singer.(11)

This program was highly successful and provided quality support and tutorials for the junior interpreters. It also provided benefits to the senior interpreters who learned how to explain what they did and why. In addition, it provided a comfortable means for newer and more seasoned interpreters to interact. But, was it mentoring? Looking back on the definitions used here, I think not. Yet, it was extremely valuable. Like mentoring, this type of programming plays an important role in transitioning novices into the working world of interpreters.

To provide an appropriate place for each, I would like to propose a new structure for post-IPP activities. It might be diagrammed like this:

Mentoring would exist on its own level, at all stages of education and professional growth. As a personal investment of one person into another, I don't believe that it can successfully be legislated.12 It is something one must accept as her/his responsibility to the profession. Virginia Hughes sums it up with, "The way I view my profession and my role is that I have an obligation to train people who come behind me..."13 and later adds that "The junior interpreters can't become seniors without mentorship... or at least it is too costly if they make those mistakes over and over and over again... But [this can change] if we can start to reinvest in our own profession instead of just run on down the road singly."14 It is something that we owe to each other and to ourselves. None of us got to where we are, wherever we are, without the assistance of others, and few will move ahead without help. An image I keep in mind for this is of one reaching a hand back to bring another along just as the same person reaches a hand forward to be brought along by someone else.

Earlier in the convention, Marina McIntire said that given the work that was being done here and the people who were doing it, she felt that she would be able to go into an early retirement. If that is so, it is because of the quality mentoring that those of us in this next generation received. We in turn must do the same if we want to look forward to a retirement, early or not. The younger generation of interpreters can't grow into leadership positions without our support and Level III and IV mentorship.

At the same time, mentoring has its specific role and limitations. In post-IPP education, we must also address gaps in understanding and skill caused by lack of experience. For this, we need internship. I would like to propose mandatory supervised internships for all IPP graduates following IPP graduation. Successful completion of this internship would be prerequisite to standing for the RID Performance Tests. Internships would be of a specified length, perhaps a specific number of hours within a set period of time, with flexibility built-in for rural and/or deaf interpreters who might need more time to complete the specified hours. During this internship period, interpreters would work for a set intern's fee which would be determined locally and would be less than that of certified interpreters. Upon completion of the internship, novices would take the performance exams. Should someone fail, s/he would be required to complete a second internship. Failure to be certified after the second internship would be cause for a different course of action, to be determined. Assuming, however, that the novices became certified, they would then enter into a 1:1 supervisory relationship with a qualified interpreter or other professional. This relationship would also be recommended for all working interpreters. In this way, the isolation of interpreters would be addressed and as a profession, we could assume responsibility for the grooming of novices into seasoned interpreters and the support of seasoned interpreters so that they could continue to work comfortably in the field.

Obviously, this is a rough proposal which needs more delineation. The ideas are based on models provided by other professions. For example, physicians complete four years of undergraduate work plus four years of medical school before they get their M.D. at graduation. After receiving their M.D., however, they are not permitted to practice medicine without supervision until they pass both their Medical Boards and complete a onetwo year internship, depending on their specialty. The Medical Boards are a three part examination which is taken at intervals throughout the internship period such that candidates cannot pass their licensing exams until their internship is complete. Passing these Medical Boards enables a doctor to practice medicine within her/his chosen field. Doctors then often pursue additional training and work within settings where collegial support and supervisory relationships are the norm.

Another model involving mandatory internship prior to licensing comes from the field of social work where students of social work must complete course work and a specified number of hours of related field work before receiving their degrees and taking a basic (L.C.S.W.) licensing exam. After passing this exam, the novice social worker then, often with a Master's degree, can work only under the supervision of a Lic.S.W., who is a Licensed Social Worker and is permitted by law to open a private practice and accept third party (insurance) payments. To sit for the Lic.S.W. examination, the L.C.S.W social worker must complete an additional 100 hours of 1:1 supervised work with a Lic.S.W. Following this licensing, social workers also work within an established system of supervision, or consultation, so that they receive support and supervision on the job.

These structures enable a graduate to enter the field ready to provide a quality service. They also establish means for professionals within those fields to obtain the support they need to continue their work. This type of structure would greatly benefit the field of interpreting and comprehensively address the issues which create our current skill gap. By establishing a structure of mandatory internships and continuing professional supervision which encourages true mentoring at all levels, we

would be able to take control of, and responsibility for, setting the standards of those permitted to practice our profession.

I am very excited about this proposal and hope it is appealing to others. Ifit is, I am eager to work on its implementation. For further discussion, please contact me at:

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Endnotes

1 Michael G. Zey, The Mentor Connection, p. 7.
2 Laurent Daloz, Effective Teaching and Mentoring, p. 30.
3 Interpreters on Interpreting: Mentoring, p. 2 [or R#:00:04:06:00].
4 Ibid., p. 9 [or R#00:16:01:16].
5 Ibid., p. 3 [or R#00:05:44:01].
6 Zey, Chapters 1-3, pp. 8-54.
7 Dante, The Divine Comedy, (J.D. Sinclair, trans.), New York: Oxford University Press, 1961, quoted in Daloz, p.28.
8 Interpreters on Interpreting: Mentoring, p. 32 [or R#00:54:57:00].
9 Zey, Chapter 4, pp. 77-107.
10 Interpreters on Interpreting: Mentoring, p. 12 [or R#00:21:17:15].
11 "Interpreter Skill Development through Mentoring" available from Bonnie Singer, CUNY Interpreter Education Project, LaGuardia Community College, C-731, 29-10 Thomson Avenue, Long Island City, NY.
12 Zey, Chapter 8, pp. 200-15.
13 Interpreters on Interpreting: Mentoring, p.17 [or R#00:30:09:02].
14 Ibid., pp.12-13 [or R#00:21:17:1500:22:51:19].

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