Philosophy of Practice

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Learning to become, and working as, a sign language interpreter is a daunting task. There is no part of the job that is easy, nor should it be. Simply put, we are asked to take a person’s message, find the meaning in said message, and interpret the message into not only a different language but a different modality. However, there are more aspects to the responsibilities of an interpreter. We are challenged with the task of providing full access for all people: the access to language, culture, and opportunity. The challenge of interpreting, the complexity of the process, and the journey towards success are what drew me towards a career as a sign language interpreter.

That intrigue, the curiosity of the challenge, the willingness to face those challenges may have been what brought me into this field but they are not what are going to define how I practice - how I interpret. Sign language interpreters need a philosophy of practice, a reason behind the decisions made, an almost subconscious force driving them to not only do the work but to do it properly, effectively, and justly.

It has taken me a long time, essentially four semesters, to realize that a philosophy is rooted in a person’s values. Therefore, I needed to define my own values and how they impact my career as a sign language interpreter. Ironically, one of the first values I have realized is self-awareness. I have long thought that I knew who I was. My preconceived notions of self-awareness stemmed from confidence. I have always been confident in who I am. I have known where I stand on issues and I have stubbornly stood by those stances in an almost defiant manner. Throughout my time at Douglas College and through the program teachings and discussion, my confidence was shaken, almost torn down to nothing, in my
journey to self-awareness. In other words, my time at Douglas College was humbling, and I truly believe that a humbling experience is what I needed. My confidence in myself, although one of my better attributes, also, at times, hindered my understanding of other people’s struggles and their perspectives. It became very clear to me that I needed to be more aware of my own self. I needed to know where I stood, how my privilege, how my occasional unwillingness to see things someone else’s way hurt not only me but those with whom I was working.

Self-awareness, at least in my case, has been a transformative journey. In fact, I use the phrase “has been” here incorrectly, it is far more appropriate to say that it is a transformative journey, and a journey which is fluid and constant. Self-awareness is based on the awareness of others. Knowing where people come from, the challenges they face, and the everyday oppression, discrimination, and struggles they endure, helps me better understand who I am. I am able to better understand just how privileged I am.

I grew up in a fairly affluent neighbourhood. There was always food in our fridge and dinner on the table. I never worried for my safety. At the time I may not have known it but my education was and has been nothing short of excellent. I was given every opportunity to succeed and I like to think that I took every opportunity that I was given. My hope is to take the privilege I have and use it in a way that can benefit others who may not have been as privileged as me. The life and education I have received leads to a very important element of my philosophy: doing well at what I do. Performing well and meeting the Canadian Association of Sign Language Interpreters (formerly known as the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC)) standards of professional competence is a
multi-faceted statement and requires continuous reflection of how to have professional competence (AVLIC, 2000).

AVLIC’s (2000) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct, section 2.0 points to the interpreter’s responsibility to be professionally competent. This section speaks the most to my values as an interpreter and the philosophy I hope to carry with me as I venture into this career. Section 2.0 (AVLIC, 2000) outlines professional competence as having four key sections: qualifications to practice, faithfulness of interpretation, accountability for professional competence, and ongoing professional development. As I have previously mentioned, self-awareness is an important value that I try to uphold and is not only applicable to the field of interpreting but is also essential in all aspects of life. However, in regards to my values directly related to a career as a sign language interpreter I will expand on each four subsections of AVLIC’s (2000) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct, section 2.0: Professional Competence, and how my values line up with what is stated in each subsection.

**Section 2.1: Qualifications to Practice**

This section speaks to one of the most prevalent values which I try to uphold: providing quality service. Essentially making sure that I am skilled enough to do the jobs/assignments that I take as an interpreter. To this point I feel like I have done everything in my power to fulfill this value. My previous education at Carleton University with a Bachelor’s Degree in Linguistics, completion of the Vancouver Community College American Sign Language (ASL) and Deaf Studies program, and nearing completion of Douglas College’s Program of Sign Language Interpretation all add to my qualifications to
practice as a sign language interpreter. All of the education I have and the training I have been exposed to have been achieved through the motivation to meet this standard of practice.

Section 2.2: Faithfulness of Interpretation

In accordance with my previous statements regarding the quality of my practice and maintaining quality in my work it is also very important to me to be accurate. Being accurate is obviously an essential element of an interpretation and it is essential that an interpretation is accurate in nature. However, how we achieve accuracy is rooted in some of my own personal values and beliefs. Being faithful to an interpretation and the original source message is related to the accessibility factor intrinsically found in interpreting, i.e. allowing individuals full access to information. The accessibility element of interpreting is related to the skills of the interpreter and their abilities to culturally mediate, work as a team, and create message equivalency throughout the interpretation. Therefore, proper access is a driving force behind my push to meet the professional demand of being faithful to an interpretation.

Another element related to the faithfulness of interpretation is my stutter. I have long struggled with a stutter and it is a part of my life. It is something that I have worked through and have overcome the many challenges that a stutter presents. However, when it comes to interpreting, access, and faithfulness of the interpretation, my stutter lends an element of concern to my practice.

When I am speaking for myself I am able to maintain the message that I want by changing the way in which I say certain words or sounds. When I am speaking as Chris I have the liberty to choose what I want to say, what I do not want to say, and how I want to say it. When working from ASL - English, and with the idea of faithfulness to the
interpretation and accessibility, I fear there will be limitations and challenges associated with my spoken English. It is acceptable to change the manner in which a message is delivered in English, to an extent. It is inappropriate and unethical to avoid names, words, or other parts of the message in order to make the task of interpreting from ASL - English easier on myself. This is something I am aware of, it is a limitation of mine, but it is also something that I am willing to take on head-first. Through practice, experience, teamwork, and support from those with whom I am working, I know I can overcome this obstacle and provide an interpretation that is faithful to the message.

**Section 2.3: Accountability for Professional Competence**

An important value for me in life and in practice is accountability, something that is overtly stated in Section 2.3 of AVLIC’s Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct (2000). Accountability can mean a lot of things but in the most simplest of terms it means that we, as interpreters, are responsible for our actions. It is important to note here that when I say actions I not only mean intentional actions but also actions related to our privilege and our social standing. When working an assignment it is important to be prepared. Preparation for an assignment is a crucial step towards providing an accurate and meaningful interpretation, if an interpreter is not prepared then they must be held accountable for the quality of the interpretation they create.

This has been an important area for my work as an interpreter. As a student and soon-to-be new graduate from an interpreting program I feel that my skills are lacking in comparison to those with experience and generally more skill than I have. Therefore, I need to be aware of when my work is not meeting the standards that I should be working to uphold
and then need to communicate when this happens. This is an important subject for me to be aware of due to the high likeliness that errors and inaccurate interpretations will occur. I need to hold myself accountable when these errors and miscues that occur throughout an interpretation (Cokely, 1986). Being accountable for your work relates to not only the value of access but the importance of an interpreter’s awareness of their position of power. ASL - English interpreters are likely the only people in the environment who have access to both languages being used and therefore hold the majority of the power in relation to access, communication, and social interactions. As I know that the value of accessibility is high on my list of priorities I am concerned with my ability and skill as an interpreter to provide full accessibility to all parties involved. I am aware that my skills as a soon-to-be graduate are limited. It is important for not only me to be aware of these limitations but also the people that I am working alongside. People deserve access, they deserve the autonomy to make their own decisions, and as an interpreter we can either allow this access to happen or hinder it. There is a lot of responsibility put on the interpreter and in my opinion, when access cannot be provided due to errors or limited abilities it is important for the interpreter to communicate said limitations or errors. All in all, as a new interpreter working in this field mistakes are going to happen and my skills as an new interpreter are limited, but I know that with the values I hold, the goal of professional competence and accountability for said competence, will always be top of mind.

Section 2.4: Ongoing Professional Development

Ongoing professional development is something that truly resonates with me. I have always had a passion for learning and I want to bring that same passion to my work as an
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interpreter. Almost every profession involves learning and change but the field of sign language interpreting, over the last forty-plus years, seems to be an ever-changing tapestry of approaches to the practice of interpreting. We, as a profession, have seen a helper model of interpreting with an emphasis on family and friends taking time to help those in need (Deaf people) with their communication struggles. We later saw a conduit/machine model emerge where the interpreter is seen as purely a communication channel for the Deaf and hearing people present. We later saw models that focus on the sociolinguistic approach to interpreting, or a pedagogical view on the practice, and a bicultural bilingual perspective as well (Wilcox & Shaffer, 2005). Needless to say, there has been a lot of change in the field of sign language interpreting and I predict there will be many more changes in the coming years. Therefore, I think it is incredibly important for interpreters to maintain a continuous level and interest for professional development. Complacency is unfair to the people we are working with. Once an interpreter loses interest in improving their skills or maintaining the most recent practices I fear they will be doing a disservice to the people they are providing service to. Wanting to succeed at what I do is an important value that I hold, but more simply, wanting to do what I do is equally as important. In other words, professional development is an integral part of an interpreter’s career and if I am passionate about professional development and continuing to learn every day I work, then I know that I am passionate about a career as a sign language interpreter.

Conclusion

Self-awareness is a skill that I must maintain throughout my professional and personal life. Knowing who I am whilst having the awareness of my social standing and privilege will
have an impact on others’ ability to be who they truly are. Which leads to my next two important values: accessibility and autonomy. I firmly believe that autonomy cannot exist without accessibility. Without being given the proper avenues through accessibility, the ability and right to self-govern is not possible. The level of accessibility I can provide as a sign language interpreter who follows an established philosophy of practice and abides to AVLIC’s (2000) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Professional Conduct will allow individuals I am working with the opportunity to be fully autonomous beings. All people deserve a voice, spoken or signed, and the quality of my work as a sign language interpreter will directly reflect that person’s voice. Therefore, quality of work, doing what I do well, and wanting to always better myself and my skills, is the cornerstone of my philosophy of practice.
References

