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BE CAREFUL WHAT YOU ASK FOR: WHEN BASIC WRITERS TAKE THE RHETORICAL STAGE

ABSTRACT: ***An implicit part of a writing teacher's purpose is to help students find a public voice through writing, encouraging them to become rhetors who take public stances and enact change. Although risk is inherent in any public rhetorical act, when basic writers address those in the mainstream, the risks intensify. These students are challenged not only by the rigors of writing within traditional forms, but also by the burden of persuading from "without." This essay examines the challenges one basic writer, a deaf student at the Rochester Institute of Technology, confronted when she took on the role of public writer. This student's attempt to enact change is analyzed for the sake of uncovering the pedagogical implications that teachers of basic writing must consider when educating students to write for the public sphere.***

As teachers of college students, many of us share the goal of encouraging students to develop their public voice. In disciplines as divergent as engineering, political science, and graphic design, faculty emphasize effective speaking and presentation, as well as writing for external audiences. Within the specific field of composition and rhetoric, one implicit purpose is to help students find their voice through writing, encouraging them to take public stances and enact change. This goal has not always been a primary focus of our pedagogy. A shift over the past twenty years has directed our attention away from the expressivist philosophy of the solitary writer engaged in self-discovery and expression championed by Peter Elbow and Donald

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Murray, to the social constructionist view of writers as agents of change in society, advocated by Patricia Bizzell and Ken Bruffee.

This newer emphasis on social constructionism has allowed students to see that their interpretive and constructive acts are dependent on social, not solely individual, activities and processes. Additionally, they come to understand that each discourse community has its own practices and conventions that must be learned by any newcomer. Problematic within social constructionism is its failure to acknowledge the difficulty all students have in mastering the conventions of the academy and those of its individual disciplines, what John Trimbur describes as "privileged discourse communit[ies]" (117). Paolo Freire , Ira Shor, and other radical compositionists enlarge upon this critique by arguing that some forms of discourse and some discursive communities are more privileged than others, "silencing those (very often, students) who are not members of the dominant discursive community" (Weisser 27). In response, radical pedagogy and composition studies have re-directed the discipline to the importance of public writing as a way for students to overcome this silencing.

This movement toward public writing has led many in the field to advocate for service learning in composition courses as well as emphasizing the importance for students of using their own voice in both initiating and participating in public discussion and reform. In fact, the 2002 Conference on College Composition and Communication promoted the theme of "Connecting the Text and the Street," reinforcing the claim that students should take what they already know and produce new texts that move in the direction of social action.

In being asked to write for the public sphere, however, basic writers are challenged not only by the rigors of writing within the traditional forms of the empowered discourse communities cited by Trimbur, but also by the burden of persuading from "beyond the boundary." Mike Rose uses this phrase to describe the place in the academy often held by students because of gender, color, ethnicity, and/or class. We posit here that his definition should be expanded to include those students marginalized because of the differences in language and culture resulting from deafness. Although risk is inherent in any public rhetorical act, when marginalized students use writing to advocate for reform within the public sphere, these risks intensify.

In this essay we examine the unique set of circumstances that one deaf student at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) confronted when she took on the role of public writer. We analyze this student's attempt to enact change and discuss the pedagogical implications that we as teachers must consider when we educate students to write for the public sphere. Although the focus of our study is on one student who is deaf, the implications of our findings apply to teachers of basic writers working with the increasing number of marginalized students enrolling in colleges and universities.

Background

Marginalized because of differences in language and culture, the 1100 deaf students at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT) are, on the one hand, the most visible component of the population. Their use of sign language coupled with their large numbers in mainstream classrooms and in the extracurricular life of the college highlight their presence on campus. However, they are largely invisible in the public conversations of the university where policy and practice are debated. Recently, one deaf student emerged from the margin when she entered the public discourse to raise awareness regarding issues of sign language interpreting in the academic classroom/community.

Since the first deaf students arrived at the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) at RIT in 1968, sign language interpreting has been their primary means of access to information in mainstream classrooms. Interpreters translate into sign language all spoken communication in the classroom as well as rendering into voice deaf students' signed comments. Interpreting responsibilities range from capturing a lecture, to signing a film, to representing accurately the "voice" of a student presentation. Beyond the classroom, interpreters often accompany students to meetings with faculty, staff, and administrators. Students clearly depend on interpreters in order to survive—and succeed—in this academic community. Faculty also rely on interpreters for their interactions with deaf students. This dependence results in a unique "triangle" of student, instructor, and interpreter. (In fact, the national agency for certifying interpreters—the Registry for Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)—recognizes potential problems of this third-party presence and has formulated its own code of ethical behaviors). Following are three glimpses into the complicated nature of such three-party interactions:

> One faculty member regularly meets with the assigned interpreter after class. She questions him, for example, about deaf students' off-the-point comments and seemingly disruptive behavior. While this may appear to be the conversation of a caring teacher and interpreter trying to understand the dynamics of this class, the organization for interpreters would consider these actions inappropriate. First, the interpreter has met with the teacher without the student—the client—present. Second the interpreter has responded to the teacher's request for an analysis of student intentions without the student there for clarification. Finally, and most important, the client has not given permission for this interaction to occur.

A deaf student has waited until the last minute to prepare his presentation, leaving no time to practice with the interpreter. Nevertheless, he forges ahead. He knows that the syntax is careless, that the transitions are ineffective, and that the diction is simplistic. He also knows that he has previously been able to rely on this interpreter's willingness to edit his text, even though the Interpreter's Code of Ethics stipulates that " faithful" translation from one language to another is required. The presentation receives a high grade. The student in this case has transgressed by taking advantage of the interpreter, and the interpreter has offered an enhanced rendering of the student's skills.

Before class begins, a group of deaf students is engaged in a casual and private conversation, not unlike the whisperings of their hearing peers. The interpreter assigned to this class has decided that her role requires her to voice all signed communication, regardless of its intention. She proceeds to voice this private conversation, making it public. One deaf student, reading the interpreter's lips, realizes what is happening and informs the other members of the group. The conversation comes to a halt. In this case, the interpreter has not differentiated between public and private discourse, over-generalizing her role as a facilitator of communication and causing embarrassment for the deaf students. Nor has she clarified with the students their expectations regarding her voicing of their casual "talk."

These examples would suggest fertile ground for public discussion and problem solving regarding the roles and responsibilities of interpreters, which have been both debated within the deaf community and codified through RID's Code of Ethics. Unfortunately, initiating a campus-wide conversation on this topic would create a firestorm for any deaf student bent on reform. Within this community, interpreters—a scarce and sought-after resource—are highly valued and respected, which makes a discussion of their professional behaviors extremely thorny. It is therefore not surprising that in the thirty years of the significant presence of deaf students on the RIT campus, no public forum has presented this topic for debate.

It was against this background that Katherine, a deaf female communication major, using electronic mail, first exposed to the faculty and administration what she considered the failures of the sign language interpreters in conforming to the explicit standards of their Code. Katherine's decision to use public writing in order to enact change broke

the long-standing silence about this issue on RIT's campus.

Some background information about Katherine is important in understanding why she would take on this controversial issue. Profoundly deaf since birth and raised in a family and a larger community of both deaf and hearing individuals, she successfully negotiated her world without the use of interpreters. Katherine reported to us that, in her experience, using interpreters was rare. Instead, she routinely had one-on-one conversations without the presence of a third-party intermediary, which, she believed, led to more equality, forcing deaf and hearing people to acknowledge and resolve intercultural differences.

Because of her successful interpersonal communication strategies with hearing teachers and peers, Katherine became increasingly sensitive to what she labeled the "interference" of interpreters in academic settings. On the one hand, they provided necessary access to the mainstream experience. On the other, they hindered her sense of control of the communication process; for example, some professors talked and looked at her interpreters rather than at Katherine, leaving her a mere observer to her own conversation. Katherine began her self-advocacy at a community college, where she successfully tackled many interpreting problems and brought awareness of deaf students' needs to a relatively small campus community, inexperienced with deafness. So, when Katherine arrived at RIT, knowing its large deaf population, she was both surprised and shocked by what she considered transgressions by interpreters of their Code of Ethics. Privately confronting interpreter managers, faculty, and deans, she used the appropriate and available mechanisms for presenting her concerns. When these strategies failed to address, let alone solve, the problems Katherine had identified, she decided to go public through writing.

In assuming the stance of public writer, Katherine followed what she believed to be a reasonable approach in raising a controversial issue. She had certainly internalized one of the goals of her writing courses—to use written language to effect change. What she did not anticipate, however, was the curious combination of misunderstanding and anger which resulted. Within the hearing community of the college, the issues she raised were largely ignored, while from the deaf community, she was exiled. Little did she know of the storms that would ensue from her decisions. Little had we as teachers done to prepare her for them.

Methodology

The unexpected community responses prompted us to examine Katherine's rhetorical action more thoroughly. To begin our study, we

examined the e-mail document Katherine sent to all RIT faculty and the chief academic administrators as well as the leaders of the deaf student government group. The text that Katherine distributed consisted of three parts. First, in a cover letter (Appendix A) in which she presented herself as Director of Academic Affairs for the deaf student government group, she urged her readers to become informed about interpreters' roles and the Code of Ethics so "fewer students will feel they are alone when confronting problems with interpreters." The letter also alluded to general concerns of deaf students regarding interpreters at RIT and encouraged everyone to work together to satisfy guidelines from both the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and the Code of Ethics. Second was an attached e-mail message from a lawyer (Appendix B) who had advocated for deaf clients' rights under ADA. The lawyer's excerpted text offered interpretations of the language of ADA as well as examples of what she considered inappropriate interpreter behavior. Third was the complete version of the *Registry of the Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) Code of Ethics with Guidelines* (Appendix C).

Our next step was to analyze the e-mail messages from the few RIT faculty and administrators who responded publicly. Another important site for our analysis was the electronic notes conference board where the deaf community conducted an extensive and heated dialogue.

The final phase focused on three one-hour interviews with Katherine. Before the first interview, we presented her with a list of written questions for her consideration regarding her motives, her rhetorical decisions, and her assessment of the community reactions. We decided to conduct the interviews ourselves in sign language, eliminating the third-party presence of an interpreter. This format was deliberately chosen in order to respect Katherine's wish for direct communication and to allow her to be completely candid in her responses. We took notes during the interviews, paraphrasing in written English Katherine's signed answers to our questions. Later, over a period of several weeks, we compared our notes to ensure consistency and accuracy in our interpretation of her signed comments . Katherine's responses informed our analysis by helping us understand not only her experience but also our responsibility, as teachers, to better guide those marginalized students who take the rhetorical stage.

Analysis

Katherine followed all the rules she understood would produce successful persuasive discourse. In her cover letter, she identified herself through her role as a Director of Academic Affairs within the deaf

student organization (NTID Student Congress) as a way of establishing her own authority. Confidently using the first person singular point of view at the beginning of her letter, she later shifted to the plural "we," aligning herself with the larger deaf campus community and thereby asserting that the "ethical issues with sign language interpreting that merit attention" were campus-wide concerns. Katherine adhered to the rhetorical advice that writers should take advantage of the power of the collective voice in identifying a problem. Her strategy failed, however, because she had not fully enlisted the support of the group she claimed to represent.

The leaders, as well as the general membership of the deaf student organization, responded vehemently to Katherine's use of her title and position to promote what many perceived as her own cause. These leaders challenged Katherine's representation of herself as speaking for the entire NTID Student Congress (NSC) by issuing an e-mail letter to all faculty and staff, disassociating themselves from the implication that Katherine spoke on behalf of the organization. By doing so, the student leaders shifted the focus of the conversation away from the interpreting issues Katherine had raised to her inappropriate use of her leadership position.

In addition to attempting to establish her own authority in her cover letter, Katherine also followed the well-established rhetorical strategy of citing legal documents and expert sources, having "learned" that personal experience is often not valued as legitimate support for an argument. She appropriately referred to the guidelines of the ADA and appended the full text of the RID Code of Ethics. Another rhetorical strategy was Katherine's excerpting of passages from a lawyer's e-mail message which described other interpreter "transgressions" that this legal authority had personally observed. Katherine assumed that the attorney's legal work and advocacy for deaf clients and the ADA would confirm that interpreter/client problems were widespread and in need of attention. The fact that she relied on a hearing rather than a deaf attorney was a deliberate political move by Katherine, who assumed her RIT audience would be more receptive to/persuaded by a hearing expert's claims. When asked during her interview why she included this correspondence, Katherine responded that the lawyer was hearing and therefore had more power and credibility.

According to Katherine, the rhetorical decisions she made for reaching her hearing audience were right. What she had not anticipated, however, was that her letter, originally intended for a hearing audience, would quickly reach the deaf community. Their reactions were completely at odds with Katherine's intent. One student wrote about the attorney Katherine quoted, "She's a hearing woman who's taken on the 'cause' of deaf people with all the best intentions, I'm sure, but don't believe everything she writes." Such a comment im-

plied that Katherine was a "turncoat" because she chose to put forward a hearing rather than a deaf expert—one whose motives were questionable within some segments of the deaf community.

For additional support in developing her argument, Katherine selected and appended particular passages from the attorney's longer e-mail message. For example, she eliminated one paragraph in which the lawyer defined a "professional" as one educated at the graduate level, as opposed to "certified" as one trained at the high school or junior college level. This deleted paragraph included the lawyer's definition of an interpreter, which was based on the language and analogies used in the ADA legislation, where interpreters are termed "auxiliary aids." They are listed along with such services as computer-aided transcriptions, telephone handset amplifiers, closed caption decoders, telephones compatible with hearing aids, and so forth. The Interpreter's Code of Ethics reinforces the ADA definition by describing the interpreter's "only function as facilitator of communication. . . [who] shall not counsel, advise, or interject opinions" (par. 3). Readers did not have the full context of the ADA language, which fueled their reaction to the paragraph Katherine did include:

> An interpreter is an assistant and a servant, NOT a "professional." An interpreter is not a "star" or a "professional advisor" or a "representative" or someone with superior knowledge or expertise. An interpreter is simply an "assistive device" for information. Training and education in sign language for an interpreter simply makes the process of information smoother—just as an upgrade to a telephone line makes a telephone call easier. Interpreters are in a vocation, not a "profession."

The reaction from many of the deaf students was fast and fierce. In a student-run notes conference focusing on Katherine's correspondence to the RIT faculty, one student responded sarcastically, "Interpreters aren't allowed to be *human*? What a gross misrepresentation calling them 'assistive devices.' And they cannot become 'professional'? I have seen many that deserve high recognition for their accuracy and obvious dedication and love of their career." In a hallway conversation, one interpreter, an African-American woman, wondered if the Emancipation Proclamation had been repealed; the word "servant" insulted both her job and her race.

Our question to Katherine concerned why she had not predicted the explosive reaction that these rhetorical decisions would provoke. She responded that she found the excerpted passages "clear and straight-forward," matching her own intent to be "informative and neutral." When we questioned her further about the problematic na-

ture of choosing an excerpt with such highly contentious language, such as the word "servant," Katherine defended her decision by saying that the letter was another person's work and she "had no control over that."

We contend that another possible reason for Katherine's attraction to the language of the lawyer's message may lie in the context of reader response theory (Rosenblatt). Katherine did what all readers do: she applied her personal interpretive frame to the text, reading her own world into it. In doing so, Katherine was seduced by the content; she focused on those aspects of the lawyer's e-mail message which matched her experiences and biases while ignoring other linguistic aspects of the text, such as the impact of word choice. For example, consider the lawyer's language in the following paragraph, which Katherine also included in her correspondence:

> There are too many interpreters out there who are asserting to deaf people that the interpreters make the rules, and that deaf people must follow what the interpreter dictates. I have observed interpreters who have refused to move when a deaf person requests it, because they were standing directly in front of a bright light or bright window, with the glare directly into the eyes of a deaf person. I have seen interpreters refuse to move to a different location when a deaf person is required to join work groups in different parts of a room. I have seen too many interpreters assume that they are "professionals" when such is not the case.

The verbs in this paragraph—dictate, assert, refuse, assume—as well as the repetition of "I have seen/observed," conveyed a combative and self-righteous tone. Katherine reported to us, however, that what was most important to her was not the tone of the paragraph but the line, "Interpreters make the rules and deaf people must follow what the interpreter dictates." Her frustration with what she considered "oppression" by the interpreters and her comment to us that "deaf people are often kinder and more lenient with interpreters than they SHOULD be," may explain the temptation of the lawyer's language.

As a final comment on Katherine's correspondence, it is interesting to note the responses she received from her intended audience—the RIT faculty and administration. Out of 750 full-time faculty, six (yes, only six) posted e-mail replies to her message. Every one contained praise for the dedication and value of the interpreters and sidestepped the persistent breaches of professionalism which Katherine raised. None confronted the real possibility that her claims warranted discussion, a necessary first step to begin the conversation that Katherine desired. More painful to Katherine were the scorn and deri-

sion she faced in her academic and social life. Katherine—not the issues she raised—became the target of campus-wide anger. Feelings were so intense that she chose to leave school for several quarters. Katherine's reputation at this Institute continues to rest on her authorship of this e-mail message. On a more positive note, however, this experience was the catalyst for her senior thesis, in which Katherine explored, from an intercultural perspective, the anxiety and uncertainty of deaf students communicating with professors in the presence of sign language interpreters.

Implications for Teaching

How do we use this case study to inform our pedagogy as we encourage our basic writing students to become active agents of change? How do we better prepare them to know the complexities that influence the design and reception of their ideas? And, how do we better prepare them for the risks they might face when they take on the role of public writer? In grappling with these questions, we find useful Marilyn M. Cooper's theoretical construct of "dynamic, interlocking systems that structure the social activity of writing" (7). In her article, "The Ecology of Writing," she describes five systems—of ideas, purposes, interpersonal interactions, cultural norms, and textual forms—as ways in which writers "connect. . . through writing" (8). This ecological model can help us reframe our understanding of what basic writers need in order to succeed in the public sphere.

Cooper first describes the "system of ideas" as a two-part construct: knowledge comes from individual experiences and observation, and from mastery of a topic's complete and "relevant idea system" (8). Katherine did turn her own history into knowledge and attempted to enter the idea system of interpreter/client issues by corresponding with a lawyer and becoming well versed in the Code of Ethics and the ADA. However, like many writers from the margin, Katherine's entry into the discourse, as well as her ability to reach her rhetorical goal, were impeded by her reliance on the most obvious and accessible sources. She did not fully familiarize herself through research with the broader conversations surrounding the interpreter/client issues she was putting forth, causing her argument to lack completeness and complexity.

A second aspect of Cooper's "ecological model" is the "system of purposes," which, like that of ideas, results from the interaction between the individual and a larger group. She contends that, "An individual impulse or need only becomes a purpose when it is recognized as such by others" (8). For Katherine, the need to educate the RIT faculty and administration about the appropriate role of interpreters and the choice to go public with her criticism were not shared by the larger

deaf community on campus. She did not actively work to understand their divergent points of view nor solicit their support, which would have helped her build a political coalition within this group, therefore preventing the unexpected backlash.

A third related category is that of "interpersonal interactions," a system in which writers "regulate their access to one another" (8). This access is accomplished through "intimacy"—writers' similarity to their audience and their degree of power in controlling the actions of others. By virtue of her culture and her disability, Katherine had "kinship" with the group she was representing. But, she did not have the power to determine that group's public agenda. With the hearing audience she had neither intimacy nor power, which further marginalized Katherine and her concerns. Her understanding was that she had to find supporting evidence for her point of view because she was not part of the cultural or academic mainstream.

Cooper's "system of cultural norms," like that of "purposes" and "interpersonal interactions," takes its meaning from the larger group in which the writer claims membership. What differentiates this system from the others is "the notion of what role the writer takes on in a particular piece of writing" (9). Katherine assumed the role of spokesperson for the deaf community on the RIT campus, but as spokesperson she did not represent accurately the full range of attitudes within her community.

The last system is "textual forms," which Cooper defines as "the means by which writers communicate" (9). These means can be conservative and traditional, but also new. Katherine used e-mail as a means of distribution. Her purpose in taking advantage of this medium was to reach a broader audience and to make more convenient their engagement in a discussion about her issue. Katherine did not anticipate that, along with its benefits, using e-mail also made the delivery of this document to an unintended audience inevitable.

What we learned about Katherine's venture into the public sphere, when put in the context of Cooper's model, offers some practical pedagogical considerations for those who teach basic writers. We know, for example, that many of these students struggle with certain aspects of academic literacy. Their limits with critical reading, with the language conventions of academic discourse, and with general world knowledge often undermine their understanding of how to present their views within any topic's "system of ideas." These writers, therefore, often perceive research as so insurmountable and mysterious that they meekly pluck from it the few accessible sources that support their opinion. As teachers, we need to reframe and emphasize the purposes and practices of research when going public. Rather than watching students fall prey to these fears and insecurities, we can inspire them

to view research as the presentation of their ideas within the larger context of existing conversations about a topic, both in support and in opposition. Designing classroom activities and assignments that will give our students the confidence to go beyond their comfort levels and to propel them into thorough research will make them more effective as writers. For basic writers in particular, persistent attention to "taken-for-granted" critical reading strategies (analysis of tone, bias, writer's position and credibility) is crucial. These skills developed in writing classes would, in turn, bolster student success in advocating for the social changes they see as necessary.

In addition, the rhetorical implications of the collective voice must be more thoroughly explored. When the speaker presents herself as "we," she must understand that the individual and the group purpose are united and presented as one. Teachers can prepare students to engage in discussion, debate, and negotiation, necessary first steps for gaining consensus. In helping our students to take on a public voice, we need to provide not only classroom team and group activities but also more instruction in how to make an individual need become a group purpose. With this accomplished, the individual basic writer, backed by a larger number of supporters, may have more success in reaching and affecting the dominant group.

Finally, teachers and students together must develop a more sophisticated understanding of the potential and the limitations of electronic textual forms for public discourse. Spooner and Yancey, in analyzing e-mail, report on its role in creating "an ideology already at work . . . , [that] entails social action" (264). They also discuss the changes in the role and authority of the author and in the relationship between author and audience. If these modifications can actually be brought about by e-mail, then basic writers will have more equitable participation, and even leadership, in public debate, rather than being barred from it, as they often have been from already-established genres.

Our title sounds a warning bell to all teachers who have romanticized the idea of the rhetorical stage being equally accessible to all students, with none being privileged over another. As our study so painfully demonstrates, the reality is far distant from the ideal, especially for students on the boundary. When we actively encourage basic writers to enact change, we are obligated to be honest with them about the perils and inequities of the current public sphere, which is only occasionally egalitarian and democratic. Weisser emphasizes that student writers must be taught "the degree to which their social status and differences from others will affect how their writing is evaluated" (103). In other words, our students need to understand that social, economic, political, cultural and ideological forces affect "what public writing is and how it works or fails to work in specific circumstances" (Weisser

97). We must include activities in our pedagogy that will teach them how to navigate the turbulent waters they are certain to enter. Our idealism about empowering basic writers to change their lives and the lives of others must be tempered by the truth that the personal risks they take may result in disappointment and disillusionment. Let's be careful what we ask for and whom we ask.

Appendix A

INTEROFFICE MEMORANDUM

February 9, ____

Dear Faculty and Staff of RIT:

As a Director of Academic Affairs for NTID Student Congress (NSC), I am contacting you on behalf of NTID community regarding ethical issues with sign language interpreting that merit attention. We feel that as the faculty and staff become more aware of the interpreters' true role, fewer students will feel they are alone when confronting problems with interpreters. Oftentimes, people are unfamiliar with the interpreters' Code of Ethics and we feel it is imperative for the faculty and staff to be educated on this. The reason is that, in addition to deaf students, you, as faculty and staff members, do rely on interpreters.

The concerns surrounding the Department of Interpreting Services and the interpreters at RIT have been ongoing. Enclosed is a selection from a lawyer regarding to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and we are also attaching a copy of Registry Interpreting for the Deaf (RID) Code of Ethics, since it is the right of deaf and hearing people alike to know as consumers of Interpreting Services.

I would like to express my appreciation for your cooperation to make time and read this letter. Thank you for becoming more knowledgeable about this subject so we can work together to ensure that the RID Code of Ethics and ADA are adhered to. If there is any questions or concerns, do not hesitate to contact me at ______.

Sincerely,

Katherine ______
Academic Affairs Director of NTID Student Congress

The ADA and the interpreters' role: **Appendix B**

Excerpts from an e-mail message from ______________, B.A., M.S., J.D, ABPDC to the Deaf Community. Please note that the examples listed below are ones that __________ encountered.

... the Americans With Disabilities Act, as it is written. ... says that interpreters must be QUALIFIED, not "certified."

A "qualified" interpreter is "qualified" in the mind and opinion of the DEAF individual who is utilizing the service, not in the opinion of some certification group." The entire policy of the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) is to stop anyone (including interpreters) from interfering with the free right of a deaf person to make his or her own life choices and decisions. Please read the Introduction to the ADA.

....

An interpreter is an assistant and a servant, NOT a "professional." An interpreter is not a "star" or a "professional advisor" or a "representative" or someone with superor knowledge or expertise. An interpreter is simply an "assistive device" for information. Training and education in sign language for an interpreter simply makes the process of information smoother -- just as an upgrade to a telephone line makes a telephone call clearer. Interpreters are in a vocation, not a "profession."

....

There are too many interpreters out there who are asserting to deaf people that the interpreters make the rules, and that deaf people must follow what the interpreter dictates. I have observed interpreters who have refused to move when a deaf person requests it, because they were standing directly in front of a bright light or bright window, with the glare directly into the eyes of a deaf person. I have seen interpreters refuse to move to a different location when a deaf person is required to join work groups in different parts of a room. I have seen too many interpreters assume that they are "professionals" when such is not the case. I have seen many interpreters accepting high fees for services when they are obviously unable to understand what a hearing person is talking about -- and they even rephrase or skip large portions of the speaker's message in order to hide their incompetence. I have seen interpreters accept jobs in Ph.D.-level classes when they haven't the slightest idea of what the instructor is talking about. I have seen interpreters show up late to interpret for a person who knows sign language, and then demand that the hearing person stop signing, even when that hearing signer is doing much better at conveying their message than he paid interpreter. I have observed interpreters gossiping about their deaf clients and sharing information on whether or not the other interpreters should serve a particular deaf person I have seen so many ethical violations it makes me ill.

No communication channel is always perfect, and interpreters are often placed into difficult situations. Many do very well, and the deaf person does understand the difficulties faced in many situations by an interpreter. I have, however, noted that in the majority of situations, the deaf person is often kinder and more lenient with the interpreter, and the interpreter has an "attitude" of superiority that needs to be adjusted. ....The best intepreter for any deaf individual is one that knows the specific needs of the specific deaf person and then drops their "ego" to completely serve the needs of the deaf individual. This should be the goal of all interpreters -- to discover the actual needs for communication of each individual served, and then attempt to be "of service" and not in control.

(If you would like a full copy of this letter by______________, please send me e-mail at________and I would be more than happy to send you one.)

Interpreting shall refer to interpreting or transiliterating from sign to speech or from speech to sign.

Interpreters:

1. Shall keep all interpreted and assignment-related information strictly confidential.

a. Interpreters must not reveal information about any interpreting assignment, including the fact that an assignment is being done. Even the most seemingly innocuous information could be damaging in the wrong hands. To avoid this possibility, and the responsibility which goes with it, interpreters must not say anything about any interpreting job.

b. If a problem arises with the deaf person and the interpreter feels a need to discuss it with some outside party, she/he should first discuss it with the deaf person, and, if no agreement is reached, the two of them should decide who can advise them.

c. When training other interpreters by the method of sharing actual experiences, interpreters should not reveal any of the following information: name, sex, age, etc. of the deaf or hearing person(s); day of week, time of day or time of year t he situation took place; the location, including the city, state, or agency; other people involved; unnecessary specifics about the situation. It only takes a minimum amount of information to identify the parties involved.

2. Shall render a faithful interpretation, always conveying the content and spirit of the speaker, using language most readily understood by the persons for whom they are interpreting.

a. Interpreters are not editors and must interpret everything which is said in exactly the same way it was intended. This is especially difficult when the interpreter disagrees with what is being said or feels uncomfortable when profanity is being used. Interpreters should remember that they are not at all responsible for what is said, only for conveyuing information accurately. If the interpreterÕs own feelings interfere with rendering a faithful interpretation, she/he should withdraw from the situation.

b. While interpreting into sign, the interpreter must communicate in the manner most easily understood by the deaf person(s), be it ASL, manually coded English, fingerspelling, mouthing, gestures, drawing or writing, etc. It is important for the interpreter and the deaf person to spend some time adjusting to each other's way of communicating prior to the actual interpreting situation. When interpreting into speech, the interpreter should speak the language spoken by the hearing person, be it English, Spanish, French, etc.

3. Shall not counsel, advice, or interject personal opinions (while functioning in this role).

Just as interpreters may not omit anything which is said (see no.2), they may not add anything to the situation even when they are asked to do so by other parties involved. An interpreter is only present in a given situation because two or more people have difficulty communicating, and thus the interpreterÕs only function is that of facilitator of communication. She/he may not become personally involved because in so doing she/he will take on some responsibility for the outcome, which does not rightly belong to the interpreter.

4. Shall use discretion in accepting assignments with regard to skills, setting, and the persons requesting the service.

a. An interpreter should only accept assignments for which she/he feels ready. However, when an interpreter shortage exists and the only available interpretedr does not possess sufficient skill for a particular assignment, this situation should be explained to the deaf and hearing consumers of the interpreting service. If they agree that a lesser-skilled interpreter is better than no interpreter or that they cannot wait until a better-skilled interpreter becomes available, then the lesser-skilled interpreter will have to use his or her best judgement about accepting or turning down the assignment. All interpreters can benefit from additional training in areas in which they lack skill.

b. Certain situations may prove uncomfortable for some interpreters. For example, a male interpreter may feel uncomfortable interpreting for a deaf female patient in the doctorÕs office. Some interpreters will be uncomfortable in situations where controversial issues are discussed or in religious settings where what is being taught differs from the interpreterÕs beliefs. An interpreter should not interpret in settings which she/he knows will negatively affect being able to render a faithful interpretation.

c. Interpreters should refrain from interpreting in situations where family members or close personal or professional relationships may affect impartiality. Even the most adept interpreters cannot be expected to mask inner feelings when interpreting for others who may affect their lives in some way. Under these circumstances, especially in legal settings, the abilityy to prove oneself unbiased when challenged is greatly lessened. In emergency situations it is realized that the interpreter may have to interpret for family members, friends, or close business associates. However, all parties should be informed that the interpreter may not become personally involved in the proceedings.

5. Shall deal with the matter of compensation for services in a professional and judicious manner (and shall be knowledgeable about the current fee guidelines suggested by the national organization).

a. Interpreters are trained to work in a professional manner and are considered professionals. Therefore, they should be knowledgeable about fees which are appropriate to that profession.

b. Since a sliding scale of hourly and daily rates has been set up for interpreters in many areas, all interpreters should have an idea of their own level of skills and the expected pay within their category. This can be

determined by consideration of several factors, such as: level of certification, length of experience, nature of the assignment, and the local cost of liv ing index ($7.50 an hour may seem high in one geographical area but low in another).

c. There are times when interpreters provide services without charge. This should be done with care and in such a way as to preserve the self-respect of the consumers. In other words, consumers should not feel they are recipients of charity.

Care should be taken when interpreting without charge that other interpreters will be protected. In other words, a free-lance interpreter may depend on this work for a living and cannot make it without charging while other persons have full-time work and can interpret as a favor without feeling it is a loss of income.

6. Shall not personally profit from any information in the course of interpreting.

Interpreters must not take advantage of knowledge acquired while interpreting. For example, if, at an interpreted meeting, it is announced that a staff interpreter in a particular agency is going to be fired, the interpreter at the meeting cannot immediately go and apply for the job or tell others about it.

7. Through the national organization and state chapters, shall seek to uphold the integrity of the profession by encouraging the use of qualified interpreters in order to achieve the highest standards.

Interpreters working as officers and committee members in the national RID and local RID chapters should press for high standards among interpreters. For example, encouraging agencies to hire only certified interpreters and the setting up of a mechanism to achieve compliance with the Code of Ethics are two of the any things which can be done.

8. Shall continue to develop his interpreting skills and keep abreast of developments in the field by participating in professional meetings, by joining with professional colleagues for the purpose of sharing information, and by reading current literature in the field.

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