The Benefits of Exposure to the DeafBlind Ecosystem for Student & Novice Interpreters

Interpreting students entering the field of interpreting as novices are exposed to various types of stressors. They now must put the theory they may have been learning to practice on real people in real situations. Often this may be overwhelming for inexperienced interpreters as they secure themselves in the field. In Seattle, Washington there is the emergence of Protactile Language from the DeafBlind community. Interaction with this ecosystem may be beneficial to student and novice interpreters by exposing them to the values, experiences, narratives, and barriers that this minority encounters. The literary review section of this research paper will pertain to the five themes involving the properties, analysis, experiences, interpreters, and education within the DeafBlind ecosystem. This collection of research and the conclusions reached may prove useful to the targeted interpreting group. It is worth noting that the Protactile Language Interpreting (PLI) website is the new name of the previous DeafBlind Interpreting (DBI) organization. Materials released when DBI was still active often are still marked as DBI while some materials are marked under the new organization name or PLI. However, all materials found under DBI can be found under PLI. DBI and PLI are synonymous with each other in terms of content.

Positionality Statement

My experience with the DeafBlind community and Protactile language is still new. I first involved myself with the DeafBlind community in March of 2022. I was first exposed to this community when I took a weekend workshop on DeafBlind co-navigating and then worked for DeafBlind Interpreting (DBI), now known as Protactile Language Interpreting (PLI), for a month as a student co-navigator. Since then I have involved myself with the community, which includes volunteering my time to co-navigate with visiting and local DeafBlind individuals. During the

spring term of 2023, I enrolled in another DeafBlind co-navigating class to continue my education on the topic. These experiences do influence my analysis of varying literary texts and information relating to DeafBlind culture, community, and Protactile language– along with having a personal understanding of the student and novice interpreting experience and the impact that working with this group of people has on one's development.

Literature Review

The articles and sources reviewed fall into five categories: anthropological properties, analysis of DeafBlind experiences, accommodations and education of those who are not DeafBlind, education and training of DeafBlind people, and the role that interpreters play when involved in this minority. When discussing anthropological lenses, Edwards (2014, 2015, 2017) analyzes the linguistic and social features of Protactile Language (PT), Tactile American Sign Language (TASL), Visual American Sign Language (VASL/ASL) and the cultural and community essence within these language groups. Edwards (2014, 2015, 2017) also expands on PT as a separate language from ASL and TASL. Protactile may have linguistic roots in the two, but they are not the same language. Another source of language use, as well as the DeafBlind experience, is John Lee Clark's written pieces. Within his website, one article is named Against Access (Clark, n.d.) he discusses the barriers he faces, the changes he has witnessed in himself as he has settled into his DeafBlind identity, and his interaction with ASL interpreters as new co-navigators. He says that "Giving quick reads without getting bogged down in details is an important skill… But ASL interpreters are at first inhibited by notions of neutrality and objectivity" (Clark, n.d., para.11). His analysis and first-hand experience are key in understanding the values in place and their impact on student and novice interpreters. Accommodations, like co-navigators, are important support tools. Wolsey (2017) opens this

conversation up and collects information from various DeafBlind College interviewees whose accommodations all differ, some using Certified Deaf Interpreters (CDIs), some using VASL, some using note takers, and so on. Within accommodations comes the connection to DeafBlind education and training. This advocacy for education can start very early. Miles (1999) provides education on how guardians may interact with their DeafBlind children; including, familial and professional support in his presentation The Remarkable Conversation. The resource page on PLI's website (n.d.) also provides information relating to the education and empowerment of DeafBlind individuals of all ages (and interpreters) in their training and YouTube videos. Speaking of interpreters, they are another accommodation option and often require training– which is extremely important in this field. Protactile Language Interpreting works to train interpreters in PT and co-navigating. In the article Discoursing into Interpreting the author provides dense information on the relationship found between interpreters and DeafBlind individuals:

> This article will focus on interpreting students' process of *Bildung* [loosely understood as linking oneself to the world and the ability to achieve understanding] expressed in their construction of professional identity as interpreters for DeafBlind people…aims to illustrate what discourses interpreting students draw upon when constructing their professional identity and how their professional identity is transformed by interpreting for DeafBlind individuals, as they draw upon and reshape concepts and discourses found in the educational context. (Urdel, 2019, p.1)

These sources contain foundational information needed to decipher the impact that the DeafBlind ecosystem has on student and novice interpreters.

Methodology

The methodology of this research, which best replicates that of an integrative review, was primarily conducted by collecting and analyzing research articles and website postings. Using Western Oregon University's (WOU) library database was influential in obtaining many of these articles. Key terms used in this search included a combination of DeafBlind, ASL, Protactile, TASL, co-navigating, interpreting, and autonomy. As well as looking at the references listed within other's research articles. Along with discussions within WOU's Interpreting Program, specifically, the 2022-2023 senior cohort, discourse and assignments within the Current Aspects of Interpreting (INT 460) class prompted information sharing. Supplementary resources from Protactile Language Interpretering's website were also involved in building this review. Any additional methods for obtaining this research were from personal interaction with the DeafBlind ecosystem, as listed in the positionality statement of this document.

Results

This collection of work highlights specific values that the DeafBlind community strives for. A prominent one is slowing down from the hearing and/or sighted standard, as access is far more important than speed. This is supported by many of the pieces on Clark's website. PT is a touch-based language and culture. Touch is a modality that our world is not built for, this means that getting the scope of an environment may take longer. This encourages students to take time to understand the DeafBlind perspective. Along with understanding the variability of what access means and how to accommodate it. Sometimes this means thinking more flexibly about what neutrality and bias mean in different spaces. Edwards (2014, 2015, 2017) provides data on how this community functions against hearing and sighted norms, which is seldom something that student and novice interpreters are familiar with. In addition, PLI teaches these values to others

but also broadcasts them on its website. Having tactile descriptions of their employees instead of focusing on pictures. Values within the DeafBlind ecosystem are endless but it is important to note a special few. The first is running on 'DeafBlind' time, which may be slower but is far more accessible and enjoyable. Next, CNs and PT interpreters are there to provide information but not make decisions. The golden rule is to never strip anyone of their autonomy. Another is being flexible in the unknown and being able to go with the flow. And last, the way a person shows respect is to touch, after all, tactile language creates connection through touch.

Discussion

The values of the DeafBlind ecosystem are extremely impactful and the community is taking more action toward access and equity each day. Student and novice interpreters must learn that one size does not fit all and that concept is extremely prevalent in the variety found within the DeafBlind Community. It is also critical that they learn about other cultures as they in their careers will interact with a wide variety of people who all have different backgrounds. Backgrounds that may include additional disabilities, and that type of flexibility in skill and mind is monumental. Being able to tackle new challenges is prized amongst interpreters and the ability to slow down is crucial. Speed does not mean you are more skilled than the person that signs slower. The goal is for the message you produce to be effective for the target audience. Tactile communication, like PT, also helps build the ability to think 'outside the box' as the language is different from ASL. That kind of critical thinking will serve them well in their professional lives. There is also the demand for access– interpreters are there to provide access and you cannot do that if you are uneducated about what access may look like to a particular community. And the golden rule is still true when applying it to ASL, autonomy is number one! All of these values and traits are needed in this growing field and by its future professionals.

Conclusion

Diving into a widely new environment can be overwhelming and challenging– but taking a step back, with a different perspective, can also be extremely rewarding and nurturing to not only one's skill but personal development. This statement aligns perfectly with my own experiences regarding my DeafBlind community involvement. It is not unheard of for student and novice interpreters, like myself, to feel anxious regarding their professional identity and skillset. Taking on that slow, steady, and calm demeanor– also known in CN classrooms as the Zen Turtle– can be a great investment in their careers. Involvement in this DeafBlind ecosystem is something that all student and novice interpreters should partake in. This exposure will only help evolve their talents.

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