Becoming Close Despite the Distance: Communities of Practice and Online Interpreter Training

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Is it possible to offer interpreter training remotely and have students remain engaged with their learning and with one another? This was a question that we were faced with when launching the Master of Conference Interpreting (MCI) at Glendon College, York University.

The Decision to Train Online

The MCI welcomed its first students in September 2012, and the design of the program was unique in a number of ways. First, the first year of the program requires students to learn to interpret in three professional settings – healthcare, legal, and conference. We made this decision to produce a new generation of generalist interpreters who were capable of working in multiple contexts. We also felt it was

important to build professional capacity in the healthcare and legal arenas. Interpreting in these settings has traditionally been underdeveloped, especially when compared with conference interpreting.

Second – and more importantly for our purposes here – a decision was also made to offer the first year of the program entirely online. This decision provided a number of advantages. It allows us to recruit students from anywhere in the world. We are also able to recruit instructors globally – and therefore to find teachers who have experience in multiple institutions and markets. Indeed, our current faculty is comprised of interpreters who work for the Government of Canada, the US Department of State, the United Nations, the European Commission, the European Parliament, the Organization of American States, the International Civil Aviation Organization, the International Criminal Court and multiple private markets in a number of different countries. This wealth of experience creates a very rich learning environment for our students.

It was also important for us to offer the first year remotely for another reason. Increasingly, conference interpreters are being called upon to work at a distance from their clients. Traditionally, conference interpretation required the interpreter to be present in the room where an event was taking place. But more recently, clients are using technology to organize teleconferences, videoconferences, webinars and other events. This same technology allows interpreters to work from a site other than where the client is located.

This new reality is making its presence felt in the industry. The European Institutions are actively investigating remote interpreting (Drechsel, 2013), and the Government of Canada is pilot testing the delivery of remote interpreting services

(PWGSC, n.d.). In the private sector, a number of start-ups have made remote interpreting platforms available on the market (ZipDX, n.d.; Voiceboxer, n.d.). It therefore seemed paramount to us to train a new generation of interpreters who are not only comfortable using such platforms, but who also might take on a leadership position in directing the development of such technologies.

For the sake of clarity, we will point out that virtual classes in the Glendon MCI are synchronous. In other words, students are online at the same moment, and they interact in real time with their instructors and their classmates. What is more, our synchronous classes attempt to mimic face-to-face interaction as much as possible. In our virtual classrooms, all participants can see one another through live video feeds, and they can hear one another through live audio feeds. In this way, students and instructors can pick up on a variety of signals that are part of live communication, such as tone of voice, pauses and hesitation, facial expressions, and gestures.

In short, interaction in our virtual classes is closer to traditional, onsite interaction than most people imagine when they hear the words “online learning”. However, students nevertheless attend class alone, from home, sitting in front of a computer. Conversations online are not as natural or as spontaneous as they are face to face. Also opportunities for informal contact – casual discussions among students before the start of class, or one-on-one queries between a student and an instructor – require a great deal of effort. Simply put, human contact in our online courses is similar to what you find in a physical classroom, but it is not the same.

In such a learning environment, is there a risk that our students will feel isolated? Or will they instead find that their online interactions are meaningful?

Communities of Practice and Interaction

We know that these are relevant questions, as they have been addressed in the scholarly literature. There is not a vast body of research on interaction in online learning, and writing on virtual interpreter training is rarer still. That said, some interesting themes are beginning to emerge.

Scholars who have looked at interaction in online learning often note that this concept can be further subdivided into three categories:

1) interaction between learners and the content of their online courses;

2) interaction between learners and their instructors; and

3) interaction between learners and their peers.

Also, the research has examined online learning in a number of different forms. The older literature looks at asynchronous learning, where students do not interact in real time, and where contact largely takes place through text (e.g., written material on Learning Management Systems like Moodle or Blackboard, or messages exchanged in an online forum).

As the technology has evolved, the research has begun to look at synchronous learning. However, this did not always take the form of close-to-physical interaction of the sort we have in the Glendon MCI. Instead, early synchronous interaction has at times been limited to real-time text messaging or online environments where participants are represented by graphical avatars.

One early study provided some insight into interaction. Jung et al. (2002) examined interaction in multiple forms – learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner. They found that of the three, learner-learner interaction was most strongly linked with student satisfaction. However, their study recruited students who

experienced asynchronous learning in a web-based environment. So it is not clear whether their findings would also hold true for synchronous learning.

A study conducted by Kuo et al. (2013) yielded contrasting findings. Their results showed that learner-content interaction was a strong predictor of student satisfaction, and that learner-instructor interaction was a moderate predictor. Interestingly, learner-learner interaction was not considered a predictor. Unfortunately, Kuo et al., do not provide much detail on the nature of the online learning. They simply note that their sample was made up of students enrolled in "online courses". They do not indicate whether interaction in those courses was asynchronous or synchronous.

The difference between asynchronous and synchronous learning was investigated by Walker (2007). He examined students' reactions to two different learning environments: the first one was Blackboard, an asynchronous Learning Management Platform; and the second was a learning environment called a Multi-User Domain, Object-Oriented (MOO). In essence, students in the MOO can send one another real-time text messages, and they see graphical environment that is not unlike a video game. Walker found that the MOO allowed students to have a greater sense of community and to feel less isolated.

The research that addresses interpreting specifically has not yet been so precise as to explore interaction or different online learning formats. Instead, it simply describes the state of the art and how it is – or could be – leveraged for the benefit of interpreter trainees.

For instance, Ko and Chen (2011) describe a synchronous online learning environment for interpreter training that somewhat resembles the virtual classrooms

used at Glendon. Students in Ko and Chen's study could see one another's video feed, and they were able to hear one another's audio feed. The authors map out a pilot study designed to assess the feasibility of teaching various tasks – dialogue interpreting, consecutive interpreting, sight translation and simultaneous interpreting – in an online environment. They conclude that such training is possible, but they stop short of advocating that it be used for whole-scale program delivery.

An article by D'Hayer (2012) points to the unique benefits that online learning may offer interpreters in the future. She looks specifically at collective learning, and she argues that it is an important part of the training of public service interpreters. Learning for interpreters, she suggests, should not be seen as something that has a beginning or an end. Rather it should be understood as an ongoing process that takes place throughout the career of the professional. Essentially, public service interpreters should gather together in "communities of practice" to share any number of common activities and the learning that comes from those activities. It is through consistent interaction that interpreters continue to deepen their understanding of their professional practice.

We would suggest that D'Hayer's argument holds true not only for public service interpreting, but for conference interpreting as well. It is often said that conference interpreters need to be life-long learners. With each assignment, conference interpreters encounter new clients, new topics, new terminology, new dynamics, and new challenges. The communications that they relay from one language to another are forever changing.

Arguably, the most interesting component of D'Hayer's article is her contention that technology actually makes it easier to create communities of practice. For

example, individual training programs, she notes, typically have limited enrollment across the board, and the numbers of students who work with a given language pair is smaller still. D'Hayer therefore encourages programs to reach out to one another through technology in order to create communities of practice that are inter-institutional and perhaps international in scope.

In sum, the literature seems to be pointing to a few general themes. First, online learning creates opportunities for different types of interaction – learner-content, learner-instructor and learner-learner chief among them. But findings from study to study are not consistent, and so it is not clear if one type of interaction should be given a priority over another as interpreter trainers seek to generate a high-quality experience – and therefore high level of satisfaction – among trainees.

Second, the nature of online learning is a key factor. Asynchronous, early synchronous and close-to-physical course delivery all have different impacts on student interaction. So attention needs to be paid to those differences. It seems highly likely that what holds true for one does not necessarily hold true for another.

Finally, interpreter trainers are looking at the potential of online learning with great interest. The technological tools have now reached a stage where they offer clear benefits as well as new opportunities that are not associated with traditional onsite learning. In the early days of online learning, educators were looking for ways to reproduce virtually what had been traditionally found in a bricks-and-mortar classroom. But online learning can be used in its own way, without simply mimicking what has traditionally been done in a face-to-face environment.

The Glendon MCI Experience

At Glendon, we have a new interpreter training program that has made a considerable commitment to online course delivery, using close-to-physical synchronous learning. As a result, we have accumulated a number of interesting experiences, over a short period of time. They help to shed interesting new light on the themes that emerged from our look at the research literature.

Learner-Content Interaction

Some of the research cited above has suggested that this form of interaction should be a priority, particularly in asynchronous courses. Yet at Glendon, the behavior of our students would suggest that this particular variable is not intricately connected with their satisfaction.

There are a number of components in the Year One curriculum that ask students to engage with and reflect on curriculum content. For example, we have students keep an online journal to assess their own interpreting performance at regular intervals. We also require students to comment on case scenarios in legal or healthcare interpreting that call into question certain ethical principles. Finally, they are asked to blog about particular parts of their development as professionals, such as connecting with professional associations, incorporating entrepreneurship into their work as free-lancers, and preparing for high-stakes institutional exams.

In other words, students are given multiple opportunities to interact with the content that comes out of their lessons. They are encouraged to engage in reflective practice to deepen their understanding of course material.

Yet consistently, this is something that students comment on negatively in our annual evaluations. Each year, they ask for less of this kind of work. Perhaps this is

because learner-content interaction in our program almost always takes place in written form. Since interpreting is an oral performance, students seem to think written work “takes them away from” the “real” matter at hand, actual interpreting practice.

Learner-Instructor Interaction

In the literature, this second form or interaction seems often to be of moderate importance. This finding is consistent with our experience.

In running the Glendon MCI, we have been careful to build in multiple avenues for students to interact with faculty. Of course, the most obvious means is to speak with faculty during real-time classes. They can ask questions or make comments online, just the same as they would if they were onsite. Also, students frequently “stay after class” by waiting until all other students have signed out of the virtual classroom before they address a specific matter with an instructor.

There are also other mechanisms. We started an online forum where students can “park” matters they would like us to address. It is there where they ask for answers they would like to have in writing – dates of year-end exams, procedures for applying for study visits, etc.

We also hold a weekly live Q&A session in one of the virtual classrooms. Students can show up and voice whatever concern might be on their mind. This is often a venue where students ask questions that would be complicated to put into writing – how to satisfy program credit requirements, how to clear up student-instructor misunderstandings, how to prepare for year-end exams, etc.

Finally, faculty often keep online “office hours”. They open Skype at certain hours during the week, which allows our students to see when faculty is available to

them. The effect is very similar to an open office door, and students can simply "drop in" virtually when they want to talk.

It is interesting to note that our students seem to react well to a mix of both written and *viva voce* solutions. However, there is much greater student participation in the avenues that allow them to speak in real time with instructors.

In terms of satisfaction, students seem pleased with these options. However, they do not ever seem to be the focus of either negative or positive comments when we conduct annual program evaluations.

Learner-Learner Interaction

In the literature, this final form of interaction does not always seem to be tightly connected to student satisfaction. But in the Glendon MCI, our students always seem to be seeking greater and more meaningful connections with their peers. What is more, they seem to have come up with some very creative ways to engage with one another.

To begin with, when a real-time virtual class ends, our students frequently meet together on Skype – without their instructor. This gives them a chance to discuss events in the classroom, to blow off steam, and to enjoy each other's company. It is the equivalent of onsite students heading off to a café or pub at the end of an onsite class.

In addition, students seem to want to communicate on separate channels during class time. The main forms of interaction in the virtual classroom are the video and audio feeds. Students see and hear one another in real time, and most of the discussions take place in this way. But the virtual classrooms are also equipped with a group chat window. When students want to contribute to classroom dynamics, but

feel that making a verbal remark would interrupt the flow, they often resort to making their contribution in the chat window. The result is a two-track interaction: the first occurs via the audio feed, and the second via the chat. This dual system is something that all of us – teachers and students – have learned to cope with. This is because there are surprisingly rich exchanges happening on both channels at the same time, and we would miss out if we only paid attention to one or the other.

Moreover, students build relationships with one another in surprising ways. Our first cohort of students had entirely separate streams according to language. The Mandarin speakers only had classes with other Mandarin speakers. The same applied to the French speakers. We were therefore surprised to see one of our Mandarin speakers attend class one evening against a backdrop we recognized. It was the home of one of our francophone students, located in Quebec City, roughly an eight-hour drive away from the Chinese speaker's home base of Toronto. The two had connected via a Facebook page that the students had set up for their own use, and the woman in Quebec City had invited her Torontonian classmate to come and visit her part of the country.

Finally, we were aware of one situation where students invented a creative way to interact with one another, albeit one that we did not endorse. In one school year, a new instructor was having trouble managing a decent pace in the virtual classroom. He was unused to the technology, and class momentum would suffer as a result. Faced with this problem, students took turns being the "representative". The other students would all freeze their camera feeds, claiming that they were having bandwidth issues. (Freezing the camera can free up more bandwidth and improve audio quality when students are on a poor connection.) These students would then go off and do other

things – eat dinner, do the dishes, play with a pet, etc. If the instructor called on them, the "representative" would send them an instant message on a smartphone and call them back to their computers. We learned about this strategy during an annual program evaluation, and we worked with the instructor to iron out the technical problems. The students once again found value in the class. But their previous "solution" was certainly a testament to their creativity!

Across the board, all these forms of learner-learner interaction seem to be of utmost importance to our students. From the time of their entry into the program, they want to connect with one another in as many ways as possible. This is something that comes out time and time again in evaluations and other discussions. To date, each promotion has been very successful in forming bonds with one another in Year One, despite the fact that they are often located in different cities, in different countries, and at times on different continents. In fact, when students eventually do come to Toronto – Year Two of the program is given onsite – it is evident at the start of the second year that bonds between students are already firmly in place.

Human Connections Can Be Formed Remotely

At this point, it is helpful to sum up the trends we see among our students. At the Glendon MCI, learner-learner interaction appears to be most strongly connected to student satisfaction, followed by learner-instructor interaction. Students do not appear to place a lot of value on learner-content interaction.

This particular constellation of trends is clearly shaped by the format of our online classes, and by the nature of the training that we offer. In our virtual classrooms, students have a close-to-physical synchronous experience. They can see and hear their instructors and peers in a manner that resembles face-to-face

interaction. The connections from person to person are established easily, in a manner that is similar to the dynamics of a bricks-and-mortar classroom. It is therefore perhaps unsurprising that students seem to place a high value on connecting with other people. The course delivery platform makes it possible, so why not seize this possibility?

In addition, the fact that student are learning to become interpreters also has an impact. Interpreters work in real time, through the spoken word. It seems logical therefore that interpreter trainees would prefer to communicate in this way, rather than through written texts. Indeed, our experience suggests that students only favour written communication in certain highly circumscribed contexts (chats that do not disrupt classroom flow, forums where they can get written answers they will need to consult later, etc.). Our students seem to have a marked preference for oral interaction, and their comments about written interaction suggest that they view it as a distraction from the “real work”.

Finally, it is important to point out that our students have taken advantage of their online learning to move interaction into forms that do not have direct analogs in the physical world. For example, they seem to like the dual-track, vocal and chat conversations that take place in the virtual classrooms. Also, using social media gives them an avenue for meeting other members of their cohort, even when they did not have classes together. (This particular experience led us to revise the curriculum. Our students now do have a number of classes together, regardless of their working languages.) Of course, there was also the incident with instant messaging that shows students will create their own work-around when they feel their interests are not being well served. None of these are forms of interaction that could have taken place in onsite learning.

When we step back from these trends to look at the bigger picture, a few things become clear, thanks in large part to the fact that our first year is delivered online, while the second is given onsite. When students begin Year Two, they always seem to be glad to at last be in on another's physical presence. After all, training to be an interpreter can be a tough slog, and support from peers is a key part of success. But it is also equally clear that our students do not begin to form bonds at the beginning of Year Two. They already know and feel connected to one another, thanks to the multiple channels for human interaction in Year One.

To put things another way, students enjoy interacting in the physical space more. But they cannot deny that they have connected in the virtual space beforehand. In answer to question posed at the outset of this article, it would seem that it is possible to have students engage meaningfully with their training and with one another in the online environment.

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