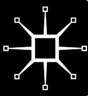

Situated Learning in Interpreter Education

From the Classroom to the Community

Annette Miner · Brenda Nicodemus

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Situated Learning in Interpreter Education

"This book bridges the gap between knowledge and real-world work experience by delineating a scaffolded curriculum that supports students' trajectory toward authentic learning that maximally develops their interpreting skills."

—Kim B. Kurz, *Associate Professor, Department of American Sign Language & Interpreter Education, National Institute for the Deaf at the Rochester Institute of Technology, USA*

"This is a systematic, didactic, very readable handbook on interpreter training. The authors make a good case for situated learning, the underlying principle being the gradual introduction of aspects of authentic situations and challenges of real-life interpreting into the guidance of student interpreters being prepared for work in the field."

—Daniel Gile, *Professor Emeritus, Université Paris Sorbonne Nouvelle, France*

"What a useful and fascinating approach to teaching and learning interpretation. This book offers a promising method for guiding students on their journey to becoming professionals, through authentic and meaningful practice."

—Sharon Neumann Solow, *Interpreter, Educator, Author, and Consultant*

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For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them.

—Aristotle

***

Learning is experience. Everything else is just information.

—Albert Einstein

***

I hear and I forget.
I see and I remember.
I do and I understand.

—Confucius

***

Acknowledgments

A book that promotes student learning through engagement with the community inevitably led us to reflect on the many individuals who encouraged us to create this book. Here we gratefully acknowledge our community of practice who supported us throughout this process.

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The Five Pillars

When facilitating situated learning activities with our own students, we found that we repeatedly turned to the same principles to guide our teaching. We now fondly refer to them as "The Five Pillars." In this box, we point you to those documents in the hopes that they are helpful to you as well.

Figure 2.2
The Four Cornerstones of Situated Learning
Page 35

Figure 3.1
Staircase Model for Interpreter Education
Page 45

Figure 3.2
Cornerstones of Situated Learning at Each Step of the Staircase Model
Page 46

Figure 3.3
Examples of Situated Learning Activities at Each Step in the Staircase Model
Page 49

Table 3.1
Expanded List of Situated Learning Activities at Each Step in the Staircase Model
Page 60

Contents

1	Introduction: Grabbing a Cat by the Tail	1
2	What Is Situated Learning?	17
3	The Staircase Model for Interpreter Education	41
4	Situated Community Engagement	69
5	Situated Simulated Interpreting	81
6	Situated Authentic Interpreting	103
7	Mock Interpreting Scenarios	125
8	Partnerships and the Road Ahead	185
	Bibliography	197
	Index	205

List of Figures

Fig. 2.1	Legitimate peripheral participation in a community of practice	33
Fig. 2.2	The four cornerstones of situated learning	35
Fig. 3.1	Staircase model for interpreter education	45
Fig. 3.2	The cornerstones of situated learning at each step of the staircase model	46
Fig. 3.3	Examples of situated learning activities at each step in staircase model	49
Fig. 3.4	Application of the staircase model for facilitating a mock conference	53
Fig. 3.5	Application of the staircase model for teaching a module: Scaffolding student learning for interpreting for Deaf students in an educational setting	56
Fig. 3.6	Application of the staircase model for teaching a course: Scaffolding student learning for interpreting a museum tour between Spanish and English	58
Fig. 3.7	Application of the staircase model across a two-year interpreter education program	59
Fig. 4.1	The process of a video relay call	72
Fig. 5.1	Gibbs' reflective cycle	95
Fig. 6.1	Sample email to actors for mock interpreting event	116
Fig. 6.2	Sample rotation schedule for mock interpreting event	117
Fig. 6.3	Sample checklist for mock interpreting event	118

List of Tables

Table 3.1 Expanded list of situated learning activities at each step in the staircase model 60
Table 3.2 The role of educators in situated learning 63
Table 3.3 Parallel components of objectivist and constructivist assessment 65
Table 5.1 Role play assignment description 85

CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Grabbing a Cat by the Tail

For over 2,000 years, thinkers such as Aristotle, Einstein, and Confucius have stated what each of us intuitively knows—that learning is the offspring of experience. Even humorist Mark Twain pointed to the benefits of experiential learning when he wrote, "I know a man who grabbed a cat by the tail, and he learned forty percent more than the man who didn't." While we don't recommend grabbing a cat by the tail as a learning activity, we do suggest that experience may be the best teacher. While some disciplines, such as pure mathematics and quantum physics, rely on doing conceptual exercises in order to acquire the cognitive skills needed for abstract representation and analysis, the skills required in performance fields and human service professions may be best acquired through the enaction of real-world experiences. For example, a person who wants to become a professional dancer may spend long hours reading about classical choreography, analyzing videos of dance performances, and studying the body's musculature, but learning to dance requires engaging in purposeful rhythmic movement intended to communicate symbols, ideas, and emotions. If one must dance to become a dancer, one must also cook to become a chef, mix compounds to become a chemist, and strike an arc to become a welder. Similarly, to develop expertise in a human service profession such as teaching, students must first practice delivering short lessons with the guidance of an experienced teacher before taking on their own classroom. To become a counselor, students study techniques

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for developing therapeutic rapport and rehearse with their classmates long before meeting with actual clients. In nursing, students practice the process of taking vital signs as one step in becoming accredited in the field.

Similarly, whether one considers interpreting a human service profession, a performance field, or a blend of both, an essential step in moving toward becoming a professional is *learning by doing*.[1] That is, interpreting students must necessarily experience the act of constructing messages between people who don't share the same language, while addressing the multitude of interpersonal, institutional, and social dynamics that come into play during any interaction prior to working as a professional interpreter. Thus, identifying interpreting as a practice profession holds a dual meaning—individuals become *practitioners* but do so only after long hours of *practice*.

We recognize the work of interpreters as a complex multi-layered task that requires both performance skills and human service expertise. Performance skills are acquired when students repeatedly experience the pressure of rapidly decoding and encoding linguistic messages between interlocutors in real time. The human service aspect of interpreting is honed when students practice negotiating with interlocutors about various aspects of a communicative event, for example, making seating arrangements that foster clear communication, or requesting clarification from one of the interlocutors. As with other practice professionals, interpreters experience growth by both performing and reflecting on the multifaceted aspects of interpreting. The social learning theorist Etienne Wenger observed that learning stokes the engine of practice, and practice represents the history of that learning.[2] Wenger contends that deep learning occurs through experiencing a task and that the degree of skill a learner attains is shaped over a lifetime of practice.

The basic premise of this book can be summed up in four words—people learn from experience. We believe that each of us instinctively knows that real-world experience leads to deep learning. As practice professionals, we have felt the impact of experience firsthand. The wisdom of experiential learning is also reflected in well-known adages such as, "Give a man a fish and he will eat for a day. Teach a man how to fish and you feed him for a lifetime." It is from these personal and wise perspectives that the theory known as *situated learning* was borne.

This book is written to advocate for the use of situated learning, a theory of learning in which teachers and mentors guide individuals

through authentic, experiential learning opportunities in a scaffolded manner. The premise underlying situated learning is that meaningful learning is made possible when it takes place in authentic social situations. Another premise is that individual knowledge flourishes and widens through legitimate engagement with people, especially those who are actual recipients of a particular service. For example, in academic programs in the human service fields of psychology, nursing, and social work, students are typically given opportunities to situate their learning by applying their theoretical foundations in environments within the community.

In interpreter education, students engage in meaningful learning experiences when they must manage the real-world challenges that arise when facilitating communication between people who use different languages. Profound learning occurs when interpreting students are situated in a variety of contexts such as wedding rehearsals, museum tours, and conferences. As proponents of situated learning theory, we argue that it is imperative for students to transition from the relatively safe, sterile, and idealized environment of the classroom into challenging, messy, and complicated real-world environments within the community. By moving into the real world, students learn firsthand how to mitigate the challenges. As the title of this book suggests, by applying situated learning theory, instructors are able to support their students in successfully moving from the classroom into the community.

To clarify, we aren't making the strong claim that experience is everything in the learning process. While we have witnessed the impact of situated learning on the development of interpreting students, we understand and assert that experiential activities must build on the theoretical foundations of interpreting typically taught in the classroom. Without question, theory and experience go hand in hand when creating situated learning opportunities. That said, in our years of teaching, we have found that students repeatedly say that nothing compares to the thrill—and the fear—of performing the actual work of an interpreter. Beyond building students' resilience in managing the challenges faced by professional interpreters, another benefit of learning by doing is that students are initiated into a community of practice.

Are we making a groundbreaking claim when we argue that interpreting students who are provided with real-world experience will grow in innumerable ways? By no means. Interpreter educators instinctively know

that engaging in the act of interpreting is necessary for developing critical skills of rapid language transfer, lexical retrieval, memory retention, self-monitoring, and maintaining composure, inter alia. Nor is the interpreting profession alone in recognizing the importance of experience in the learning process. Situated learning theory has been adapted to training in numerous other practice professions that recognize that "experience is an arch to build upon."[3] We look to other human service professions, notably counseling, nursing, and social work, that incorporate experiential learning into their training programs. As with these professions, interpreter educators acknowledge that students must develop both a theoretical foundation of the profession and specific performance skills in order to be successful practitioners.

That said, we do suggest that training individuals to become interpreters brings challenges that may not be found in other human service fields. First, counseling, nursing, and social work programs typically have no profession-specific prerequisites for admission.[4] The assumption of many human service programs is that individuals can enter into the training tabula rasa, that is, without prior knowledge with the assumption that students can acquire the necessary theoretical and practice skills for professional practice. By contrast, in interpreter education, linguistic fluency in two or more working languages would seem to be a logical prerequisite prior to being accepted into a program. However, to date, many interpreting programs, specifically in signed language interpreting, hold no language requirements prior to enrollment. As a result, interpreting students may enter interpreting programs as monolinguals or bring very limited bilingual proficiency to the classroom. Under these conditions, interpreter educators must scramble to create assignments to accommodate the students' language gaps.

A second challenge is that interpreting is a much smaller discipline than other human service programs, a factor that results in limited resources for educators. For example, over 10,000 degrees in counseling psychology are awarded in the United States in a single year.[5] According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, social work is one of the fastest growing professions in the United States, with more than 680,000 social workers in employment.[6] Finally, the profession of nursing has more than 3.1 million registered nurses currently practicing in the United States.[7] In comparison, spoken language interpreting offers a handful of bachelor's degrees in the United States and signed language interpreting has approximately

40 BA-level programs. Taken together, perhaps only 350–500 baccalaureate students graduate from spoken and signed language interpreting programs annually, a miniscule number compared to the number of graduates in other human service professions. To compound the issue, no statistics exist for the attrition of these graduates following graduation. The large number of programs and graduates in counseling, nursing, and social work results in social and financial incentives at the state and federal level to develop curricula, revise textbooks, and manage professional organizations. Publishing houses, research teams, and other specialists in these fields support the creation of academic materials. Conversely, the small numbers associated with interpreter education are evidenced in its limited educational resources.

Another challenge is that interpreter educators may not have specialized teaching credentials. As a result, interpreter educators frequently report cobbling together their lessons by grasping at a variety of instructional tools and methods. With uncertainty, they may draw from a scattered collection of source texts and rely on their own and others' anecdotal reports of what it means to be an interpreter. The outcome is that interpreter educators report feeling trepidation and uncertainty of their ability to produce graduates who are ready to enter the interpreting profession.

We reiterate that interpreting is similar to other human service professions in that it requires practitioners to demonstrate mastery of complex knowledge and skills, including cognitive flexibility, interpersonal sensitivity, and problem-solving capabilities. Also, as with other practice professions, interpreters work directly with people and must adhere to a professional code of ethics as well as be adept in interpersonal skills. Practice professionals need both theoretical foundation and the ability to apply theory to real-world problems in their work. Critically, interpreters must possess a high degree of fluency in at least two working languages and cognitive capabilities far beyond those required of engaging in everyday conversation. To rapidly co-construct meaning between two languages along with managing a host of other issues is no small feat. In fact, interpreting has been referred to as the most challenging linguistic task imaginable.[8]

Of course, the challenge of interpreting is a part of its appeal. For one, becoming a professional interpreter is a path for lifelong learning. As with musicians whose artistic expression can mature over time, interpreters also can continue to grow throughout their careers if they engage in reflection

about their performance and work to develop their linguistic prowess. As interpreter educators, our challenge lies in how to create meaningful experiences that will guide students into a lifetime of growth and professional practice.

As authors, our particular orientation is that of being signed language interpreter educators who work in the United States. However, we believe that whatever background or languages an individual brings to interpreter education, the application of situated learning theory can be highly beneficial. Indeed, we contend that situated learning can be useful in spoken and signed language interpreter education, mentoring programs, or in any program whose goal is to create more authentic experiences for students. We also recognize that in the pursuit of offering quality education to students, interpreter educators may feel more at a loss than in other training programs. The following scenario is an illustration of how we—and perhaps you—may have felt at one time or another in the role of interpreter educators or mentors.

"Am I a Fraud?"

It's Sunday night. You are preparing for the upcoming week of teaching your interpreting skills classes. Unfortunately, all-too-familiar sensations of anxiousness are mounting. Once again, you feel uncertain about what you can do to guide your students into the skills they need to succeed as professional practitioners. Over the past several weeks, you've assigned various texts for the students to interpret, collected the assignments, and dedicated long evenings to writing detailed feedback about their work. To your dismay, however, your students continue to show the same patterns of errors week after week. You wonder if the students have even read your carefully constructed comments, much less tried to incorporate them into their interpretations. Perhaps the students don't understand how to apply the feedback to their work? Occasionally, a student makes a remark such as, "That video didn't give me the chance to show you how I would interpret in a real situation," or "If actual consumers had been present, I would have interpreted it differently." Privately you admit to yourself, "They have a point. I want to guide the students into the challenges of professional practice, but my assignments seem so artificial! Can interpreting even be taught in a classroom setting? Sometimes I feel like such a fraud as an interpreter educator."

If you've ever had similar thoughts about your teaching practice, you're not alone. Many of us have felt the pain of "imposter syndrome," the psychological pattern in which one doubts one's accomplishments and has a persistent internalized fear of being exposed as a fraud. Despite external markers of success, individuals who experience imposter syndrome remain convinced that they are incompetent; that they do not deserve all they have achieved. Studies have now shown that university faculty are among the groups that frequently experience imposter syndrome.[9]

For individuals who didn't train nor expect to be interpreter educators, the feelings of being an imposter may be even more pronounced. After years of working as a professional interpreter, perhaps you were encouraged to become an interpreter educator. A colleague may have observed that you had skills that would serve you well as a teacher. Or perhaps you had been a mentor to novice interpreters and began to wonder if you could extend those skills in a classroom setting. Or it may be that giving back to the community is a strong value for you, which could be accomplished by teaching the next generation of interpreters. If you were a signed language interpreter, you probably had earned an advanced degree, but with little or no formal training on how to teach interpreting.

Once in that educator role, you may instinctively sense that interpreting can only be fully learned by doing it. You recall moments of your own learning during work experiences that shaped you into a professional interpreter. How can those valuable real-life interpreting experiences be integrated into a postsecondary institution with so many required structures—tests, projects, rubrics—not to mention the albatross of grades? You soon learn that, as much as higher education holds lofty mission statements about "expanding minds" and "building tomorrow's citizens," these institutions also depend on the commodification of learning[10] through the production of measurable assignments and grades. In the higher education environment, learning is typically restricted to fixed times in classrooms and language labs, with few opportunities to apply theory to the actual interpreting work that is happening outside the institution.

You've tried a variety of teaching techniques in your classroom. You give well-prepared lectures. You assign group work to the students. You provide compelling case studies for examination. You assign interesting and authentic pre-recorded material for the students to practice interpreting. But many of your lessons feel stilted or artificial; in fact, you can see the students trudging their way through them. Without clear

assessment measures, you give passing grades to students each semester, while feeling that their skills are still inadequate. Year after year, the situation continues and the answer of how to effectively teach interpreting continues to elude you. Whatever you try to implement in the classroom, your students constantly want more hands-on practice, hungering to do the actual work that brought them to the program. How can you provide your students with authentic experiences of interpreting that you know they need to succeed? What steps can you take to guide students into increasingly challenging experiences that are embedded in the community?

In this book, we attempt to address these important questions by advocating for the type of learning that draws students into guided, real-world, contextualized experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, while establishing critical foundations using other valid learning approaches. In this book, we offer a practical, user-friendly guide to an educational theory known as situated learning. We believe that both doing (practice interpreting in authentic settings) and receiving immediate feedback (from teachers, mentors, and community members) are critical for opening doors for student interpreters. Over a number of years, research findings have also come to support the notion of "learning by doing."

With the lens of situated learning, interpreting is best regarded as an applied activity that must engage students in real-world contexts. Put another way, learning that is situated is as close as you can get to real work, but it is work that is done with training wheels. You will find that situated learning isn't easy for all students. Not every student will get a gold star when faced with grappling with the complex work of interpreting. When placed in authentic interpreting environments, some students will thrive by facing their mistakes and will acquire the skills necessary for professional practice. Other students will find that they aren't cut out for the demands of interpreting or that they simply aren't interested in interpreting work. As Oscar Wilde stated, "Experience is the name that everyone gives to their mistakes"[11] and those experiences may lead students down the road of growing into a professional or may point them to a different, more suitable path.

We suggest that situated learning both supports student learning and provides an avenue for teachers to have more rewarding instructional experiences. Another critical part of situated learning is to engage local communities in interpreter education in a meaningful, but natural way. Through such partnerships, community members can engage with

students and consider their potential to serve as interpreters in the community, rather than meeting an unprepared graduate for the first time at their doctor's appointment.

But before we dive into the virtues of situated learning, we offer one small caveat. That is, we make no claims that situated learning will immediately rappel you to the top of the mountain known as interpreter education. We would be thrilled if you got to an educational summit where you could plant your flag and shout, "I've arrived!" Although we strongly believe in the merits of situated learning theory, we recognize that it is but one approach that interpreter educators can draw upon in their work. Further, by definition, situated learning theory must necessarily be tailored to instructors' personal teaching style, community, institution, and students. We would love to claim that situated learning is *the* ultimate solution to the problems in interpreter education; however, that would be a blatant overstatement. Rather, the premise of this book is to provide readers with a theoretical and practical backdrop for how situated learning theory can be facilitated to enhance the learning of interpreting students. We contend that most students learn by experiencing the joys—and anxieties—that come with actively engaging in real-world interpreting. If we are excited about the power of situated learning leading to positive learning outcomes, it is not only because the research supports it, but also because we've lived this approach in our own teaching. Our hope is that guiding students toward greater competency in authentic learning settings may result in your own "I've arrived!" moment and help abandon any feelings of being a fraud.

To begin, we share some observations about the current state of ASL-English interpreter education in the United States. The points offered here specifically address ASL-English interpreters, but we believe that educators in other language pairs may find comparisons with professional issues in their work. One study examined the characteristics of signed language interpreting programs and graduates by analyzing existing data from a 2009 needs assessment collected by the National Consortium of Interpreter Education Centers (NCIEC).[12]

The study verified the readiness-to-work gap that exists for graduates of interpreting programs, dubbing the gap a "systemic crisis." At present, many states in the United States require some type of signed language interpreting certification (state, national, or specific to K-12 settings) or license prior to employment.[13] This requirement can create a confounding dilemma for graduates from an interpreter education

program. On the one hand, individuals are prohibited from interpreting until they obtain certification but, lacking work, the same people have no structured avenue for improving their language fluency and interpreting skills. The number of individuals who leave the field after graduation from interpreting programs has not been documented; however, anecdotal reports indicate that graduates who are unable to find post-graduation support may move on to work in other employment settings or remain at their current job. Given these circumstances, it is no surprise that post-graduate mentoring programs for interpreters are on the rise, but again, statistics verifying their efficacy are not available.

In ASL-English interpreting, successful transition of graduates into professional practice is often the result of experiences within the Deaf community. In the 2009 study, one faculty member reported, "Students who willingly make friends with members of the Deaf community and interact more than the required amount of time tend to do *much* (emphasis by the faculty member) better on their state certification exam."[14] The study recommends that educators in interpreting programs should "foster more opportunities for out of the class learning" by incorporating real-world interpreting experience so students can interact with communities through practicum and service learning.

Other studies that point to the importance of learning from experience come from research on language brokering.[15] Some successful interpreters were born into families with Deaf members who used American Sign Language in the home, and thus, acquire ASL at a young age. As a result of their language experiences, these individuals often function as language brokers and interpreters for their family members, accumulating years of ad hoc experience among the Deaf community in the work of interpreting.[16] These early occurrences of language brokering may contribute to their later success as interpreters. Importantly, studies on language brokering suggest the common denominator in developing successful interpreting skills is experience in real-world interpreting.[17]

In addition to problems with admission policies, curriculum, and language modality discussed earlier in this chapter, another long-standing issue affects interpreter educators. That is, few graduate programs are available to prepare individuals to become interpreter educators.[18] The number of graduates from such programs is still small, and the pedagogical programs also may not have faculty who have specialized training

in interpreter education. As touched on earlier, the instructors in interpreting programs historically have been professional ASL-English interpreters who were then recruited to teach in a program.[19] Many of these instructors have had no training in curriculum design, classroom management, educational policies, and pedagogical principles; rather, they based their teaching on their personal experiences as interpreters.[20] This situation is confounded by limited curriculum materials and students with inadequate fluency in ASL.

Finally, the body of research on signed language interpretation is increasing and covers a wide range of topics. However, there remains a particular lack of studies of teaching practices and curriculum in interpretation.[21] Empirical research on Translation and Interpreting Studies is increasingly being embraced in the field, and the infusion of evidence-based research findings into pedagogical practice is on the increase[22]; however, it is still unknown if research on interpreter education is incorporated into classroom teaching practice.

With this book, we are aiming to provide a user-friendly guide that may counteract these issues and assist interpreter educators with a teaching approach that has proven fruitful in apprenticeships and human service programs. We admire the example of other interpreter training guides, notably the *Interpreting in the Community and Workplace: A Practical Teaching Guide* by Mette Rudvin and Elena Tomassini.[23] As with their work, we position this book within the interpreting domain we are most familiar with, but with the hope that a wide audience can benefit from its content. We support Franz Pöchhacker's perspective that, in interpreting, there is unity in diversity,[24] that is, our commonalities as educators and practitioners are greater than any differences we may have. As a starting point, we believe that all interpreter educators cherish language, culture, and community—values that we all wish to impart to our students. With this book, we offer an approach that can address those shared values in our profession.

In this chapter, we provide a brief overview of interpreter education and introduce the theory of situated learning. We open Chapter 2 with a story of two students whose interpreting experience has been scaffolded through a series of situated learning activities. We then describe the theoretical grounding of situated learning, including principles of learning transfer, cognitive apprenticeships, authentic learning activities, and communities of practice. We trace the development of situated