Why trainers should be practicing conference interpreters

We should never forget that while we may teach the subject of interpreting, in essence we teach students. With that in mind, we can look at the advantages that students gain from working with teachers.

Interpreting knows no routine and thus training needs to be grounded in experience. The aim must be for graduates to have attained a professional level by the end of their course of studies. The target is the day after graduation, always keeping in mind that the safety net disappears once training is over. And in addition to passing on interpreting skills, practicing professionals are also better positioned to answer questions about the present reality of the profession.

I was a trainee once. I became a professional conference interpreter after in-house training for Portuguese booth interpreters at the European Union in 1985. I cherish certain moments in my memory; I still loath others. And I pay unceasing tribute to all my trainers. They were responsible for my discovery of the profession and for my liking it. When they finished with me, I joined the staff. Later I became a trainer myself for the same course. Later still I chose to become a freelance interpreter.

And I kept training budding interpreters. I soon realized that training students for a specific institution or international organisation demanded a different approach than training students in a university setting. But there is one common denominator: the trainers themselves must be practicing conference interpreters.

Students may or may not become staff interpreters; they may or may not become freelancers working for international organisations. Most will try their luck on the local market before moving on to the rest of the world.

If one is called upon to put together a team of trainers for a course, one needs to get a few things straight: Who are the students? What language combinations and level of language proficiency do they have? What degree(s) do they hold? How old are they? What is their life experience?

The answers will determine who your trainers should be (language combinations needed, for example). And they will also forecast if the students will have a chance in international organisations, and if so, which ones. If they do, you may be able to seek assistance (pedagogical, technical, even financial) from the organisations that stand to benefit.

Another question one must ask is what future awaits potential graduates. Is there market demand for their skills and language combinations? It is important to have an idea of what lies ahead. Students
will ask and they deserve answers. And the answers are best given by those who work in the field: practicing interpreters. Since different trainers have different language combinations, their experience on the market will also be different. This will contribute to giving students a more comprehensive view of the reality outside the classroom.

We try to train the human mind to work in the way it must to interpret. The human mind thinks, doubts and looks for answers. Training is usually done in small groups and it is excellent if a group spirit arises. Such a spirit also inculcates the kind of team work that contributes to good interpreting.

I believe that such group spirit and team work is essential to trainers. It is the foundation for:

- Building a coherent curriculum and body of training materials.
- Inculcating the skills and attitudes needed for conference interpreting.
- Letting each individual trainer feel free in the classroom without throwing doubt on the main guidelines.
- Creating accountability amongst trainers and transmitting a sense of responsibility to the students who, soon enough, will realize that a large part of the results come from their own effort and discipline.
- Transmitting the same group spirit to the students, who after all are encouraged to apply the skills talked about in class to their own practice sessions.

Why practicing professionals?

A practicing professional is someone who not only has trained to be an interpreter, but who works as one.

Trainers who are professional conference interpreters deal with a wide range of subject matter in their work, and they will be able to introduce real-world material into the classroom.

Interpreters must prepare for assignments and their preparation techniques and skills can be shared with students.

The practicing professional is constantly reminded that he is not an expert in the subject matter to be interpreted. He will be exposed to the evolution of international discourse and of his languages. He will have learned that prime lesson: “engage your brain before speaking.”

Trainers who are professional conference interpreters make mistakes in real life, learn from them, and can use the knowledge gained to help their students.

Interpreters who work in a variety of conferences are in touch with the reality of our field and with other colleagues. They will be constantly reminded that they know a lot more than what readily comes to mind, and at the same time they will be continually updating their knowledge base. They can thus share their reflections on very concerns, such as:

- Stress and how to handle it
- Mental resistance to fatigue and routine
- The frustration of always conveying somebody else’s ideas or views
- Doubts about accepting or refusing a contract/challenge
- Discipline and the need to build a good reputation
- The advantages of respecting professional ethics and standards, seen as concrete aids to professional practice and not simply as “ideals”
- The ways in which open-mindedness and a humble approach may contribute to a successful career
Working interpreters can share such reflections based on experience and they will have examples at hand. They will better be able to feel how and when theory or other intellectual constructs can best help students.

Professional interpreters constantly work with other professionals. The relationships they develop with colleagues often lead to collaboration in the classroom, guest lectures, etc. that will be of interest and value to students.

Teachers must design final exams, and with direct, ongoing work experience they will be in a position to ensure that exams reflect reality and are an effective gauge of professional competence.

From the other side

We should never forget that while we may teach the subject of interpreting, in essence we teach students. With that in mind, we can look at the advantages that students gain from working with teachers who are active in the field. In addition to what is implied from the previous section, it can be said that:

Students should have the chance to see and hear professional interpreters. Can you imagine novice painters never seeing the works of the masters? Expertise is transmitted through more than words.

Interpretation students must spend many hours practicing. But practice does not make perfect if not properly designed to hone skills needed for the “real world.” Their teachers must be the bridge to that world.

Students want – and deserve - to know what comes next. A practicing professional should be there to guide them when they seek help.

Most students will concentrate on skills acquisition and remain unaware of other factors that affect performance in the conference interpretation world. They need trainers familiar enough with that world to help prepare them for it.

Successful students will soon be colleagues, and teachers fully integrated in the profession can help them make a smooth transition to the world of work.

Lifetime of Training

After one starts working another kind of training awaits. It is less related to technique, more related to professional ethics, working conditions and finding your way in the market.

Colleagues will play the role of trainer, conveyers of information collected through experience. Some did for me.

That is also why I wanted to become an AIIC member - common sense to me.

And then there is my usual mantra: no business as usual in this line of work.

Note from the author: Many thanks to Luigi Luccarelli for his input.

Recommended citation format: