

Face to Face vs. Screen to Screen: Re-Envisioning Online Continuing Professional Development for Interpreters

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Abstract

If interpreting and interpreting education are to reach new heights, as the conference theme encourages us to do, we need to thoroughly examine the underlying beliefs that have shaped Continuing Professional Development (CPD) in its current form in the US. This panel, composed of experienced interpreters, educators, and online facilitators, analyzes the approaches to and rhetoric surrounding, current CPD practices. Current rhetoric often frames online learning as inherently passive, less effective and non-interactive, while characterizing face-to-face activities as superior, seemingly equating physical presence with “learning.” This mindset values physical presence over intellectual engagement. Shifting the prevailing paradigm of CPD in general requires identifying effective approaches for online CPD. Doing this will inform approaches to not only CPD, but even more importantly, begin to establish best practices to enable educators to instill these values in students of interpreting from their first exposure to our profession.

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Conceptualizing CPD (Continued Professional Development)

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) is an umbrella term used to describe knowledge and skills development engaged in by professionals after their initial training. As with other professions, interpreters working between signed and spoken languages must engage in CPD. Tenet number seven of the current National Association of the Deaf/Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (NAD/RID) Code of Professional Conduct states, “Interpreters are expected to foster and maintain interpreting competence and the stature of the profession through ongoing development of knowledge and skills” (RID CPC, ND). For RID’s purposes, this professional development is required for interpreters to continue to maintain certification by RID, and the program to monitor this is called the Certification Maintenance Program (CMP).

CPD for RID certified interpreters, although originally defined using language that focused on learning, studying, and developing skills, is currently actually measured via the counting of a specific number of hours in a specified time period. RID requires 80 documented hours in a 4-year period. RID has chosen to measure these in terms a common term in CPD, the Continuing Education Unit (CEU) where 1.0 CEU = 10 hours of professional development (IACET.org, ND). Although this is standard in many professions, the use of the CEU as the de facto unit for measuring CPD is somewhat problematic. Indeed, as professionals whose fundamental tool is language, it behoves us to reflect upon how our use of language impacts our thinking about and valuing of on-going professional growth and development. Holding a dynamic perspective of learning, developing, and growing is much different from holding one that count minutes, hours, number of coffee breaks, and 10-minute late arrivals. Reflecting on the title alone of Kegan and Lahey’s well-known volume, *How the Way We Talk Can Change the Way We Work!* should give us all pause! As language and communication professionals, actively pursuing professional development needs to be our goal, rather than the accumulation of time. Bonwell and Eison (1991, p. 2) in one of the earliest works to define active learning, list these characteristics of active learning (emphasis added):

- Students are *involved* in more than listening.
- Less emphasis is placed on transmitting information and more on developing students' skills.
- Students are involved in *higher-order thinking* (analysis, synthesis, evaluation).
- Students are *engaged in activities* (e.g., *reading, discussing, writing*).
- Greater emphasis is placed on *students' exploration* of their own attitudes and values.

It will be demonstrated later that many online activities actually promote these types of activities, in some ways more than face-to-face activities do.

Since CEUs are the proxy for engaging in CPD in the US, much of the rhetoric around CPD is couched in terms of earning CEUs rather than actively engaging in professional development. While RID does make a distinction between Professional Studies (CEUs that direct relate to interpreting) and General Studies (those involving more general knowledge) and the 6 out of the 8 required CEUs must be in Professional Studies, for all intents and purposes, the focus is on the earning of CEU’s (which must be approved by RID or an approved RID

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Sponsor). The actual earning of the CEUs is the tacit goal; there is no further requirement of reflection, or evidence of putting into practice what one has learned. Indeed, most recently, RID had explicitly stated this policy for earning CEU “time”.

“Complex Independent Studies may include a mix of direct contact hours, and non-contact hours. Using a 1 to 0.1 ratio for direct contact hours (with a definition and examples) is appropriate. Using a 1 to 0.05 ratio may be more appropriate for non-contact hours. The credit applied through CEUs should be clearly identified as a ratio to be awarded according to the work/time invested” (RID Sponsor Connect 2018). To clarify, if a participant submits ten hours of work, the log might segment these ten hours as 2 hours in an online workshop (which would qualify for the traditional 1 hour to 0.1 CEU) and eight hours of independent work such as reading or doing research, which would be calculated as a different ratio, being worth as little as half of the time spent watching an online lecture (e.g. perhaps the 1 hour to 0.05 CEU, depending on the sponsor). Mixed Independent Studies often may include a mix “contact” and “non-contact” hours and those CEU hours must be clearly identified as a ratio to be awarded according to the work and the time invested, not the learning and development achieved.

A different approach to CPD is taken by the registering body for British Sign Language/English Interpreters in the United Kingdom. The National Register of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deaf-Blind People (NRCPD) is the voluntary register for BSL/English Interpreters (unlike RID, they do not certify interpreters, there are academic and non-academic routes to become qualified; these routes are mapped to the National Occupational Standards for both spoken and signed language interpreters.). The CPD requirements involve completion of learning activities as well as reflections on how the specific activities contribute to one’s professional practice. The details of the NRCPD procedure are outlined below.

It is interesting to note that both RID and NRCPD explicitly mention CPD in their respective codes, and both espouse “active” learning. However, the wording and the meaning they reflect, are quite different. In the next section, we review and compare the two perspectives and approaches.

Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)-Current and Past

Looking first to the NAD/RID Code of Professional Conduct (CPC), Tenet number seven states:

7.0 Professional Development

Tenet: Interpreters engage in Professional development

Guiding Principle: Interpreters are *expected* (emphasis added) to foster and maintain interpreting competence and the stature of the profession through ongoing development of knowledge and skills. (CPC 2018 RID website).

Note that the focus of the terms “foster and maintain” seems to be on active learning, however the wording is ‘expected’ not ‘required’. It is worth noting that the 2 previous iterations of the NAD/RID CPD (or the equivalent) had what appears to be stronger language.

Tenet 10. Recognizing his need for professional improvement, the interpreter will join with professional colleagues for the purpose of sharing new knowledge and developments, to seek to understand the implications of deafness and the deaf person’s particular needs, broaden his education and knowledge of life, and develop both his expressive and his receptive skills in interpreting and translating. (Quigley and Youngs 1965)

Tenet 7. Interpreters/Transliterators shall strive to further knowledge and skills through participation in workshops, professional meetings, interaction with professional colleagues and reading of current literature in the field. (1979 version as included in Frishberg 1986).

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National Register of Communication Professionals working with Deaf and Deaf-Blind People (NRCPD)

NRCPD, like RID, mentions CPD in their Code of Conduct, however in a more directed (notice the use of “you”) and specific manner:

4. You must maintain and develop your practice in line with the recognised standards of your profession.

4.1 You must have up-to-date knowledge of practice theory and its application, including any relevant practice guidelines published by professional associations. You must incorporate that knowledge into your practice where appropriate.

4.2 You should adopt a reflective practice approach to developing your practice and pursue relevant educational opportunities. (NRCPD Code of Conduct).

In order to maintain one’s self on the register, an interpreter must document 24 hours of CPD per year; 12 of these must be “structured” hours; also note the focus on requiring learning outcomes:

Structured activities are usually easy to identify. They are organised by associations, employers, training providers or other organisations, and they have stated learning outcomes. Unstructured activity is anything without a stated learning outcome that helps you achieve your CPD objectives and develop your professional practice. (NRCPD 2016).

In addition to documenting CPD activities, registered interpreters must also provide evidence of how the undertaken activities have influenced their practice. In its CPD Handbook, NRCPD informs interpreters that “you must keep a record and evidence of your CPD activity; [as well as] explain how your CPD activity has helped you develop your professional practice.” (NRCPD 2016). Also NRCPD recognises that a simple counting of hours is not adequate. They state, “We understand not everyone agrees with a system based on the number of hours spent doing CPD. That’s why we’re exploring approaches to CPD that focus only on what has been learned.” (NRCPD 2016). This focus on reflection and incorporation of knowledge is closer to the spirit of CPD rather than the mere logging of hours of attendance. Interestingly, NRCPD counts the writing up of reflective notes as unstructured activity, recognizing that reflection on an activity is another form of CPD. Such documented reflection is not required in RID’s CMP and is, perhaps, the missing piece – this lack of language that guides interpreters to focus on learning and demonstrate that learning instead of counting the number of minutes they are ostensibly “in contact” with something. The discussion in this paper narrows the CPD discussion to online experiences, distance learning activities, and we hope to demonstrate that many online activities more actively encourage and support and his sort of reflection and integration of new knowledge and skills than many traditional face-to-face activities. Active learning – regardless of the mode of delivery and type of environment – is what we should be expecting from our students and ourselves, whether one is beginning a career in an introductory course or one is a seasoned interpreter or educator participating in a professional development event.

Re-Focusing Our Perspectives: Types of CPD Activities

In the United States, CPD has traditionally involved face-to-face activities; workshops, seminars and specialised training delivered by experienced practitioners/trainers. With advances in technology, many more options have become available. Often, travel and time are barriers to interpreters’ access to CPD activities. In the 1980s and 90s a form of distance learning emerged, satellite teleclasses. These were training activities that were broadcast from a location to numerous other locations (often colleges or universities) which had the ability to receive the transmissions. The obvious benefits were local access to training, little or no transportation/accommodation costs and, often the ability to phone in with questions or comments. Because of the technical time and preparation required to make these events successful, participants valued the experiences.

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Distance learning – now also commonly referred to as online learning – has come a long way since the Educational Interpreter Certificate Program of the mid-1990s when mailing videotapes (and later, CDs) across the country was the norm. Part of the effectiveness for some was the individual's own motivation or proclivity to that style of learning and their engagement in the required activities; participants saw value in the interaction, albeit delayed (Johnson and Winston 1998). And part of the effectiveness was due to those providing the opportunities, in the way they structured the process. Since then evidence of the effectiveness has been shared with the field, demonstrating the effectiveness of a variety of “distance” approaches (e.g. Winston 2006).

However, there have always been some in our field who have resisted advancing technology: “you cannot teach interpreting via distance”. Indeed, RID’s Motion CM2017.01 proposed limiting the number of Continuing Education Units that a certified member could earn from “online trainings” to 25% of the total required. We see this as an example of outmoded attitudes and perceptions that prioritize the value of face-to-face activities and minimize the value of online CPD activities, rather than addressing the importance of quality offerings that support active learning...regardless of the delivery approach.

The RID Motion CM2017.01 stated: “ASL is a visual language best understood in a face-to-face interaction. The majority of interpreters are second language learners. Given these facts, professional development is most effective in a face-to-face environment”. This blanket statement should give us all a reason to pause. The conclusion gleaned from these “facts” seems faulty at best; is there truly a connection between the success of face-to-face interactions in ASL for second language learners? Also, the converse, has there been research on the use of ASL in a distance format being ineffective? With the improvements in technology and the ability to have multiple signers on a screen and/or even a monologic presentation by a person who uses ASL, does anyone really believe that online workshops conducted in ASL are less effective than those conducted in English?²

Has this research been conducted by RID or is this the dated thinking of a few members? Given the technological advances available to us (far beyond mailing videotapes across the country), and given the technological savvy of the upcoming generation of interpreters (who have grown up with iPads and YouTube and Video Relay Services) we believe we need to apply what we already know about active learning and critical thinking and challenge ourselves to offer “online opportunities” that capitalize on the myriad ways technology can support the distribution systems and processes. The quality of the offering far outweighs the method of delivery. Questions about the efficacy of distance learning have shifted from “if” to “how.” It is not about where or how we teach and learn, but as Winston (2006) reminds us:

Just as traditional face-to-face approaches can be highly motivating for students or deathly suffocating to active learning, so, too, can every form of distance learning, from old-fashioned correspondence courses, to simple asynchronous online discussions and interactions, to full-blown synchronous computer-animated dog-and-pony shows. It is not the format or delivery method of the lesson or activity that is important; it is the design that teachers use in development and the expectations, goals, and interest of students participating in the learning that result in, or hamper, active learning. The most exciting activities designed to stimulate learning will fail if students are not interested in learning, if they expect simply to be taught “at.” The most lifeless bit of fact can open a new world of experience and learning if it sparks a fire in the learner's mind. This is not news. To quote Plutarch, *The mind is not a vessel to be filled but a fire to be kindled*. The fire can be kindled in any environment and educational setting. (pg. 168)

This trend in interpreter education follows that in adult education in general. The focus of our work needs to be “for active learning, rather than passive absorption of information; for reflection rather than memorization.” Daniels and Bizar (1998) compare educational practices that are effective for active learning. These are summarized in Table 1.

² We are not discussing accessibility here—CPD opportunities need to be accessible through the use of the languages, access modes (be they interpreters, captions, transcripts, etc.) regardless of which language(s) are primary.

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Table 1. Characteristics of Effective Learning Approaches³

Less Effective for Active Learning	More Effective for Active Learning
Whole-class-directed instruction, e.g., lecturing	Student responsibility for own learning
Student passivity: sitting, listening, receiving and absorbing information	Active learning through talking, collaboration and experience
Prizing and rewarding silence in the classroom	Participation in the classroom
Class time spent on reading texts	Experiential, inductive learning
Superficial coverage of broad content	Deep coverage of fewer topics
Rote memorizing of facts	Critical focus on thinking skills
Emphasis on competition for grades	Collaboration in learning

Although this presentation will be a panel discussion with input from experienced interpreter educators, and their input and conclusions will be added after that panel occurs, we offer a couple of examples of distance, or “screen to screen” activities that can help re-focus our perspectives about CPD from counting bits and minutes to actively seeking growth and learning.

Example 1: Active learning thru online workshop interactions – the facilitator’s perspective

In-Service Training (IST): The Department of Access Services (DAS) at Rochester Institute of Technology/National Technical Institute for the Deaf (DAS) is the largest employer of educational interpreters in the world, with approximately 150 full-time interpreters. Every semester DAS offers approximately 30 professional development events which they call In-Service Training (IST)⁴. In the fall of 2016, the first online IST was offered and 8 interpreters participated in “Role-space: You’ve Heard the Term But What Does It Mean?”. The facilitator knew the interpreters; they all worked on the same campus but because of the variety of schedules, Rico Peterson, the Associate Dean of DAS, wanted to offer an online option. Interpreters committed to two hours a week over a 15-week semester. Some of the interpreters saw each other during the course of the day, but often they did not, due to the large number of interpreters on campus and their varied schedules. So for some, the only contact they had with their Role-space peers was online.

For this IST, interpreters were required to lead a discussion on an assigned chapter in the volume, *Role-Space Theory* (Llewellyn-Jones and Lee, 2014) submit a specific number of required postings, and complete a project. Their projects required the interpreters to be as “active” as they could be! It was an applied project; interpreters analyzed their role-space in a particular assignment – not their interpreting skills but their presentation of self and the social expectations of the interlocutors. Each interpreter submitted an online poster with an accompanying brief outline of their experience. All the participants then had the opportunity to comment on their own and on each others’ projects. Some of their comments about the project:

- *I learned that it is truly the characteristics of the class interaction that decide the nature and dimensions of role-space. I believe that through this analysis I came away with more questions [than answers].*
- *This IST has been very helpful in validating and putting vocabulary to behaviors I already employed and thought were working, but sometimes [I] second-guessed [myself].*
- *My presentation of self became stronger as the semester went on. The first few weeks were group meetings with strict procedure. As the semester continued, groups broke off into small groups. During these times I realized it was more effective for me to have a strong presentation of self and become a*

³ Table 1 first appeared in the 2006 CIT Proceedings, and is re-printed here

⁴ These include one-off events and semester-long workshops.

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member of the group. By breaking out of the “interpreter only” role I was able to show the members that they could communicate comfortably and did not have to monitor themselves. It seemed to make all of the interactions more comfortable.

From an educator’s perspective, what more could we hope for? Participation in the IST was completely voluntary; interpreters saw something that interested them and they decided to participate. The delivery system was not an issue for them. Now certainly, the facilitator’s availability and support was important. Mid-way through the semester participants were offered “office hours” – via phone, Skype, or email. They were able to “meet” with the facilitator to discuss their projects, and several used the opportunity to great advantage. This was not an independent study where they progressed at their own pace. This was a group experience and they functioned as a learning community, actively engaging with each other online throughout the 15-week semester.

As a result of the success of this first-step, the TIEM Center offered a professional development opportunity for interpreters during the spring of 2018, “Role-space: You’ve Heard the Term But What Does It Mean?” with several modifications from the event at DAS. Several brief video introductions were made for the event and for each chapter. Given the fact that we hoped interpreters from across the country, and indeed from around the globe, would participate, this allowed for a virtual relationship, if you will. Although video introductions were not required from the interpreters, they at least became familiar with the facilitator’s view of the work. The Coursesites course delivery system was used for this 5-week event and the 16 participants had the option to earn up to two CEUs for RID.

It was exciting to have 16 interpreters participate in this whirlwind of activities. Only one person dropped out part way through the experience. We all have busy lives and yet it seems when interpreters have the opportunity to actively engage with their peers, they find the time because they see the value in the engagement. Participants spent an average of 29+ hours per week online, not to mention the time spent outside of the webinar preparing! It is not the hours, it is the active learning that is so impressive and important. The quality of their postings was excellent. Prompts were developed that asked them to *apply* what they read to their real-world experiences. These interpreters had a variety of backgrounds but they were all working interpreters and they all had a fairly strong sense of “presentation of self” – even if they were not familiar with Goffman’s terms at the start of the webinar. This experience gave them a reason to step back and look at their work, to share their perspectives with others, and to reflect on their role as professionals, grounded in the role-space approach to interpreting.

*Example 2: Mentoring*⁵

Another type of ongoing active learning is mentoring, and being mentored. It has long been identified as an essential component for the development of effective interpreters, and indeed, for mentors and educators. Time and again, distance mentoring has been found to be both supportive and effective; active learning occurs and each moment of that learning deserves to be “counted” equally as opportunities for effective learning and growth. One caveat for distance mentoring, and indeed any distance activity is that the activity must be organized and clear – although we must be frank here...what educational activity should NOT be? Here is one example of planning and organization that supports learners in their quest for active learning and true professional development. Note the specific structure provided for timelines, scheduling, and active reflection included throughout, as well as the explicitly defined roles and demonstrations of learning required. Participants are reminded that mentoring is about working with others, rather than dictating to others, and that concern for accessible communication is expected. However, what and how they apply their learning, actively, as they conduct their mentoring, is left for their own reflection and journaling.

⁵ A similar version of this example first appeared in the 2006 CIT Proceedings (pg. 180).

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Mentoring Activity: Assessing Interpreting and Mentoring Interpreters

Logistics: This 3-week learning activity was part of a longer course (12 weeks) for aspiring mentors, intended to help them develop interactive questioning and teaching strategies for effective mentoring of student interpreters. It began with reflection about their own skills and led them to reflection about others' skills.

Week 1: Prepare an individual assessment of your own interpreting sample. Post your assessment to the entire class by the final day of Wk. 1, by noon ET.

Week 2:

1. Discuss and comment on the Interpreting Assessments posted by other people in the class. You should look at a minimum of 2.
2. Using the input from the discussions, prepare an assessment of your assigned partner's interpreting sample. Post that assessment to the class by the final day of Week 2, by noon, ET.

Week 3: Hold mentoring appointments with the interpreter whose work you assessed in Week 2. You need to set up 2 appointments with each other.

- In one, you will act as mentor, working with the individual interpreting assessment that your partner posted.
- In the other, you will act as the mentee, using the interpreting assessment you prepared for your own sample.

NOTE: For this week, you are welcome to set up appointments as you wish. The appointment should last for 45-60 minutes in the course chat room. You can use other means of communicating if you prefer: AOL chat room, videophone, etc. Use of telephone with voice-only communication is not an accepted medium. The only requirement is that the communication be directly accessible for Deaf people (in chat rooms: written English; videophone: signing only). Even if you are both hearing, this is a good time to remember and practice inclusive approaches to communication. It is strongly recommended that you do not conduct them back-to-back! You have all experienced the fatigue of these interactive mentoring sessions.

Your roles:

Mentor Role: Your goal as mentor is to work WITH the mentee to identify strengths and areas needing improvement in her/his assessment assignment (not the interpreting sample) and assessment skills. You should also work with the mentee to determine how she/he might present similar information to a mentee in other settings.

Mentee Role: Your goal as mentee is to actively work with the mentor on understanding your skills in assessing an interpreting sample, to discuss your strengths and areas of discomfort or areas where you want direction or help. You should be prepared to contribute throughout the discussion with your ideas.

Demonstration of your applied learning: Journals. You will keep notes and prepare reflections in a journal, and post it to your small group facilitator within 48 hours of each meeting. The requirements and criteria are the same as before, when you mentored each other about your Language Assessment assignments.

The example above is intended to demonstrate the need for detailed and explicit information in online, and distance, learning activities. It provides timelines, describes specific roles and activities, materials to be included, and the end product, all while encouraging the participants to work together to encourage active learning for both of them.

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Conclusions

Activities that can incorporate and encourage critical thinking and active learning need to be consciously designed to achieve those learning goals. Educators need to approach their own activity design by first explicitly stating these goals, then reflecting about authentic, holistic approaches to achieving them, and only after this should they begin structuring specific activities so that learners are able to build on their own existing knowledge, expand their experiences, explore, and finally, critically analyze options. Learners need to create their own work, making decisions about their work, and finally they need to assess the effectiveness of their own work. Taking this even further, they need to be able to assess the work of others, and guide them in the same reflective and analytical thinking process they have benefited from. Educators need to instill this in interpreting students (Winston, 2006, Pg. 171). We believe that the prevailing paradigm that requires a physical presence eschews the importance of active learning. Innovative learning can happen with a strong online presence from those delivering the activity, and with a foundation of quality and applied learning. It is one thing to sit in an all-day workshop simply to earn CEUs. It is quite another to take the time to apply critical thinking to one's work over a period of time – with support from peers, teachers, and mentors – that results in professional growth and a sense of true learning.

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