

Translation: Gary Sanderson "Providing Feedback"

translated by Kathryn Bennett, MA, CI

[Clip 2: Providing Feedback](#)

[Clip 3: Providing Feedback continued](#)

2. Providing Feedback

I'd like to talk a little bit about the process of mentoring. But before we begin, we need to step back a bit and recognize that, as a mentor, we must have an understanding of what is happening inside someone's head. (pointing to top of head) There's not too much hair here, but oh well....In order to engage in the mentoring process, you need a framework. I feel that in our field of interpreting, there are two possible frameworks to use: the Cokely Model of Interpreting or the Colonomous Model. Whichever model you feel most comfortable using, use it. Without a model of analysis, mentoring becomes very subjective; it becomes based on how something "looks" or "feels," which in the end is not very helpful or productive. With a model serving as a framework, you have a template to guide your mentoring.

As for myself, I prefer the Cokely Model, just based on the way the chart is visually composed. I think it must be a "guy thing." With the model, you can look at someone's work as a mentor and say, for instance, "It seems that you don't understand the presentation or lecture. That is the 'preliminary process;' that is, taking the information in and creating meaning from it. You don't have an understanding of the meaning, right?" Now you can provide assistance with strategies for not having an understanding of the material to be interpreted.

Or, as another example, there could be a breakdown in producing the material in the target language so that the information in Spoken English is heard and processed, but the knowledge of how to sign it is not there. Another possibility is a difficulty achieving semantic equivalency. That is, the source material is received and processed but interpreted in an incorrect register. For instance, perhaps the interpreting is being done using casual, informal language similar to 'chit-chatting', while in reality the mentee is speaking using formal language because they are in a formal setting like a classroom. Using a model gives the mentee a structure and framework to examine their work and target specific areas to focus on for practice and improvement. It really helps a mentee to have a greater understanding and to know that the job of interpreting is comprised of many different aspects, each of which can be specifically targeted for improvement. It really helps and it makes me more aware of my work. When I am mentoring, I know that the mentee is watching me while I am interpreting and will be asking me questions about my interpreting process. If there is a miscue or an error in the interpreting they will ask me questions about what went wrong. And I can say, for instance, "Oh yes, internally I knew that was an error in preliminary processing. I had no idea what the meaning was." And then we can have a discussion about the interpreting process. It helps me; it helps them. And it allows



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us to talk about it later.

There are several interpreting models: the helper model; conduit/machine model; the communication-facilitator; bi-bi or ally model...although really, I don't care for that label. I think, actually, it's very stupid. Do you know any interpreters who are not bilingual?? I'm a bilingual interpreter. Duh! But, yes, we are bi-bi or ally interpreters. Let's suppose I meet another interpreter who has been interpreting for thirty years and uses the conduit model. I use the ally model. We are not going to have common ground. We are not going to understand each other. But, suppose I say to them, "Explain to me your theory or philosophy of interpreting." And they can explain and I can respond that mine is a little bit different and provide that information. Now we can understand each other and talk about our work. Maybe the mentee is someone who wants to change to a different model. Maybe they are stuck in the conduit model and just feel like a machine. Now they want to become more bi-bi. I can explain to them how to take the steps to do that, to change. I can give them information about grammatical or structural changes to make. In addition, there can be an explanation that one particular way is not a "gospel" and that it is alright to change. For all interpreters we need to know our philosophy or our framework. Why am I doing the things that I am doing? And then be able to explain it. There is a reason for everything and we need to know what they are. The mentee, of course, will ask, "WHY? Why are you doing that?" And I can't just say, "Well, because! That's who I am." We can't say that. We have to be able to explain everything. It does create a big headache of sorts.

Ok, next on the agenda. I'd like to talk about looking at the interpreter's videotape. Now, as older, more experienced interpreters we can feel it's important to show new interpreters everything! 'I've been interpreting for thirty years, so I'm going to teach you everything I know!' When we look at the videotape, then, we end up analyzing it so specifically, for every little detail. For instance, the mentee might get feedback about why they are doing something with an eyebrow, or a small movement with a pinky. And it becomes so overwhelming for the mentee, they feel as if they are no good at all. Instead, we need to have the philosophy of "if it is not broken, don't fix it." We don't have to tell them every possible thing. There is no way I can teach them thirty years worth of experiences in one week. I have to pick the things that I feel I can really give them that they can learn. That's why I believe when goals are established three is the limit. Otherwise, the poor mentee is bombarded with trying to think about a myriad of things all at once. If we pick two or three of the most salient things, I can establish a schedule.

For instance, let's say we'll be meeting Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays. On Mondays, we'll focus on fingerspelling; Wednesdays we'll focus on classifiers; and Fridays we'll target lag time. That's for three weeks. The next three weeks



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we'll practice the skills that we have learned. This is a much easier approach. When the mentee is mentally preparing, they know which day it is and what to focus on. They can be in the right frame of mind to focus on a particular goal. So, when it is Wednesday, they can think, 'OK, today is Wednesday and I need to work on....focus on....' What did we say for Wednesday? Oh, right! Classifiers. You can see I have no short term memory. Too many years of California smog getting in there and warping my brain.

When I am the mentor and looking at a mentee on videotape or live interpreting I need to be looking for patterns. So, let's say the mentee does something once, like fingerspelling the name of a country instead of using the sign for it. One time, don't worry about it. Drop it. A one time occurrence is not worth discussing or giving feedback. That's crazy. Look for patterns and then fix it if it happens over and over again. Sometimes patterns can be really difficult to find. When you are watching you know that there is something there. One time.. [laughing] I was watching a videotape and there was something that in my gut was just really bothering me. But if I were to tell the mentee there is just something about this that isn't right, that's not helpful to them. Sometimes I might need to call someone else in and have them look at it to. In this situation it turned out there were five of us all watching this videotape and we discovered that the person was exhibiting use of really long vowels. I was looking for something else entirely. But it was what they were doing with their mouth that was making me crazy. The point is that I have to be able to identify it and articulate it to be able to explain it to the mentee. I can say to the mentee, 'Did you know that when you are voicing you are producing really, really, long vowels. That you tend to that, like 'eeeeeeee,' very long. And you look like a frog. Look.' I mean, I didn't say that. But, it's helpful and productive to be able to give details. Or, in the case of fingerspelling...

I remember once my aunt, who is deaf, and I were sitting at the breakfast table together. She always criticizes my interpreting. [chuckling] Anyway, one morning we were sitting around at the breakfast table and she asked me to fingerspell a sentence. Now, I had just arrived home the night before from Europe and my mom had said to go visit my aunt. Even though I didn't want to, I was a good little nephew and went. So I fingerspelled the sentence and she told me I have a flying I. And when I heard 'I,' I thought she meant 'eye.' But really, she was saying 'I.' I was completely clueless; I couldn't make sense of it. She explained, "It's your pinky. When you make an 'I', it jumps up and down. It's easily excited." So, I asked my dear, sweet aunt how to fix it. And she said to remember where it is all the time. To that, I replied, "Well, thank you. It's on my hand." She shot back, "Don't be fresh!" And we went back and forth like this. But anyway, as applied to interpreting, I noticed that in fact, I did have a pinky that went up and down. But now, because she told me



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and I was aware of it, I could feel in space where the finger was and be able to control that movement better. One time, I was teaching a sign language class and when I formed my 'l', they all said how hard that was to copy. And now I have thirty students, all of whom are producing it the wrong way. Oh well... The important thing is that I can control it. That, of course, is the only bad thing I've ever done all along.

When we are sitting down with a mentee and discussing the videotape in a feedback session, we can have our form with either the Cokely model or the Colonomous model. You can refer back to the paper and analyze the video according to that framework. What is your thought process there? Let's see where this fits in... And they can use that while they are working. It is extremely helpful to them in terms of improving. And we just focus on the three goals. That does not mean three goals for sign-to-voice and three goals for voice to sign. Focus on one thing at a time. If you have three for each and are going back and forth, that is just too overwhelming. It's difficult, because we want to touch on everything and cover everything. But we need to make sure we are specific enough that we can effectively develop strategies for improvement.

3. Providing Feedback continued

Also, we want mentees to have opportunities to practice it, and then go back and review or revisit it. And then, maybe six weeks later, hopefully it will have become internalized in their work. If we have six, seven or eight things, that won't happen. Or if we tell them just to look at vocabulary; that's always a problem. It's always, always a problem. A form can help give you ways to think about juggling and handling lots of different information all at once. Maybe one week you are working in a Catholic church and the next week in a temple. You're going to have to learn that there are ways to handle new vocabulary. Vocabulary will always be an area of difficulty. Period. I think it's important. It happened to me... One story, just one. That's it. I was giving a lecture to an interpreting group and the woman introduced me by saying, "I remember when Gary came here to CSUN. He was a lousy interpreter! He just couldn't interpret." And I'm thinking, 'Well, thank you very much!' But it makes me more human. I mean, I grew up with deaf parents and with a most unique communication style in my house. It would be, you know, three or four words in a sentence and then a sign tacked on at the end. But it was better than my brother! He would speak the whole sentence and then just throw in a fingerspelled letter every now and then. I don't know how my parents understood him! Anyway, when I arrived at school, I had to learn how to interpret. I mean, I'm not perfect and I made many, many mistakes. You will make many, many mistakes...



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Feedback! I suggest you read anything Sandra Gish has written on the topic of feedback. It is really excellent and very helpful. Feedback should give a sense of positive feelings. I mean, it should be honest, but it shouldn't be in a way that is extremely negative and critical. Be gentle; be honest. There's one book I read that I really love, titled "A Whack on ...the Head." The author is Roger Van Oëch. It's German, I think. He has a lot of really great short quotes. One of them is, "Looking for the second right answer." For me, as a mentor, that means putting aside my ego, or the mentality that I am the only one who knows how to sign it the right way. If the mentee signs something correctly, leave it alone.

In feedback, if I say to the student that I would sign something a little bit differently, then they never feel successful. If they hear that what they did is right, but I would do it another way, the student will never feel like they can never be right. But instead I might remark that what they did was good and something I would not have thought of myself. So, give both positive and negative. I mean, I know we've talked about psychological methods and the use of praise followed by criticism followed by praise. Very early on, they will learn that the praise has criticism sandwiched between it. And then they will never hear the praise. They will just be waiting for the negative criticism. So again, be honest, but at the same time don't give them false praise. It is a really fine line.

Another thing is that during an interpreting assignment, as mentors we tend to write a lot and take a lot of notations. I like to tell the mentee to keep in mind all that is going on. In this context, I mean not what the teacher is saying that they are covering in the lecture or what the hearing person is saying or what have you, but that in spoken languages 120 to 130 words are said each minute. And after one hour, I will have put down a total of maybe sixty things. I am commenting about, in essence, less than one minute of their full lecture. I tell them that if they can do that, they are doing fine! And maybe many of things I am jotting down are positive things to point out. So, in the end, we are left with twenty things to work on. And these are not necessarily things that are wrong, but just information about another way to do things. And now the mentee can feel a boost of sorts, that in fact they are doing a good job. They'll have the mindset that they can do it, instead of thinking the mentor is sitting there busily scrawling all sorts of things that are being doing badly. Out of a lecture that might include a total of 50,000 words, I've put down sixty. So I can tell them not to worry, that they are doing just fine. It helps them feel good about themselves.

I went to a workshop given by Anna Witter-Merithew. In that workshop, she gave four sentences that really hit home and stuck with me. They definitely helped me become a better mentor. The first was that we are all doing our best. You know, I don't know of any interpreter who comes in with a mindset of really wanting to mess up everything. I mean, we are doing our best. And remember, the mentee



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is also doing their best. Next, she said that every interpretation will have miscues. It will. We're human. We hear something and what we produce in an interpretation we might later wish we could just erase. Yes, it will happen. And the mentee is the same as you and will make mistakes. We don't have to show them every single one. Some of them, they already know themselves. The next sentence was in regards to talking about "the work." Not the person, but the work. We can eliminate the word 'you' and instead say 'the work,' or 'the interpretation,' or 'that sign means.' When we phrase it that way, rather than 'You're signing...' or 'What you did...', it makes the mentee more receptive to hearing what we have to say. And lastly, she said that we need to have a model to discuss our work. And this goes back to the Cokely or Colonomous models that give us a guide and a way to look at our work.

I like to tell a story about interpreting that I think help us all to learn. My program has two types of mentoring: live and videotape programs. My story relates to the videotape program. We send videotapes out all over the western United States. Mentees videotape themselves working and then they send the videotape back to us. When we receive the tape, we sit down as a group to administer feedback.

Initially, when that program was established the mentors were not skilled in how to give feedback in writing. This was a departure from feedback given one-on-one, in person. So, we struggled with figuring out how to work with the modality of written feedback. We'd meet periodically to discuss it. We got a videotape and started watching the tape. I remember just looking at this work and taken aback by what I saw. I was thinking to myself that this was just plain lousy. But, I knew I couldn't put that down as the feedback: "You are lousy." I needed to find a good way to say they were lousy. One of the women there walked up, took the tape out of the VCR, and said "Alright, next!" All of us were at a loss for what to do. This was just not possible. We had to give some kind of feedback. Her viewpoint was that the person on the tape couldn't even begin to interpret because they didn't even know sign language! If we were to give that person feedback, they would think they are an interpreter. And they are not.

So, we must remember that not all mentees are ready to interpret. We must be prepared to tell them that. If they don't know sign language, we need to encourage them to go to the Deaf community and find a Deaf language mentor. In this way, they can learn the language itself. When the language mentor feels the person has achieved a certain level of skill with ASL, then they are ready to come back and begin an interpreting mentorship. It's not possible to teach language and interpreting at the same time. It must be one or the other. If the person is not able to use ASL, then they need to go learn that first in the Deaf community. In the



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past, I was fortunate to go to Ohio where they had established a program with two different groups. The first group was comprised of Deaf community members serving as language mentors. The second group consisted of interpreters trained in the mentoring process.

With that program, a mentee was lucky to be able to go to either group depending on their needs. Maybe we need to set that up here...Deaf language mentors and Deaf interpreting mentors in order to encourage people to learn the language, too. One other thing...before you engage in feedback sessions with a mentee, be sure to practice the feedback and analysis process several times. It's really quite difficult. Watch a videotape and practice looking for the patterns, finding them and how they fit with the model and then how to use the form to document it all. Practice all of those things, and do so with another mentor. Practice actually giving the feedback with statements that incorporate "the work." It's really hard. Practice the process for several weeks. Then, when you are ready, go ahead and sit down with a real, live mentee to give feedback. I don't know about you, but for me it was really difficult to make sure my feedback was phrased as "the work," instead of falling into that natural tendency to say "I" and "you." It's really tough. So, practice that first and you'll feel better about it. Watch several videotapes, practicing those skills and try things out with another mentor. You'll improve to appoint where you are ready.

My presentation now has probably gone on long enough. I hope you enjoy mentoring. Go ahead and practice and do well. Thank you.

