Mentoring Trends and the Practicum Process

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Abstract

This paper discusses current, ongoing research about the mentoring relationship and practicum structure across interpreter training programs in the United States. The first phase of this study was conducted as a small-scale pilot study involving surveys and focus groups from the researchers’ current students, recent alumni, and mentors in the interpreter training programs at both Bloomsburg University (Pennsylvania) and The Community College of Baltimore County (Maryland). In this phase, qualitative data related to the process of mentoring and trends in the mentoring process was collected. The second phase of this study, currently in progress, involves a national survey of interpreter training programs and the practicum process. The researchers include preliminary data from this survey including structure of the practicum requirement, mentor and mentee roles, whether “mentors” provide mentorship activities or whether they function more like “supervisors”, mentor training and transitioning novice interpreters from school to work.

Keywords: practicum, mentor
Mentoring Trends and the Practicum Process

The findings of this research study that were presented at the Conference of Interpreter Trainers conference in 2016, Lexington Kentucky, include only part of the data that was collected. Due to the date of the conference the researchers chose to only analyze the surveys that were submitted by October 1st, 2016. The survey remained open and another 17 surveys were later submitted. Another article that will include all of the survey responses will be written at a later date.

Introduction to the Study

In discussions that we had about our respective practicum courses, we realized that these practicum courses had many differences. This sparked our interest in exploring whether there are differences in how community colleges versus universities design practicum courses for interpreters. We were also interested in if there were standards across the United States in how interpreting programs ran their practicum/field experience courses. Another area of interest was whether we could identify current trends in interpreting practicum requirements, trends in mentoring students in practicum, practices that the colleges and universities found most successful, and what techniques/tools were being used for the mentoring experience. We conducted this survey which started in June 2016 and closed in November 2016. Due to the Conference of Interpreter Trainers Conference being held in October of 2016, we stopped looking at the survey results of this presentation and proceedings in September, but allowed the survey to remain open until November 2016. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the Community College of Baltimore County.
Methodology

Data Collection

In Phase I, a 10-question survey was sent out via Survey Monkey to former interpreting students who had recently graduated from either CCBC or Bloomsburg. A similar survey of 10 questions was sent to mentors who worked with students from CCBC and Bloomsburg (they may have worked with other institutions, but we did not ask for that information). In the survey, participants were asked if they wanted to engage in a focus group. Students from both CCBC and Bloomsburg participated in focus group discussions. The survey was sent out to a total of 232 mentors (201 mentors from CCBC and 31 mentors from Bloomsburg) and 61 former students (29 from CCBC and 32 from Bloomsburg). Based on the survey, participants who were willing to be in a focus group were directed to email either Becca Minor if they were affiliated with CCBC or Jessica Bentley-Sassaman if they were affiliated with Bloomsburg. The focus groups were split by institution, with former CCBC students interviewed by Becca Minor and former Bloomsburg students interviewed by Jessica Bentley-Sassaman. There were six former students in the CCBC group and four in the Bloomsburg group. Mentors who worked with CCBC and/or Bloomsburg also participated in a focus group. Again, the groups were separated by who had worked with CCBC students and who had worked with Bloomsburg students. Two CCBC mentors were interviewed by Becca Minor and four Bloomsburg mentors were interviewed by Jessica Bentley-Sassaman. The focus group interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes to an hour in length. The questions that were asked can be accessed in Appendix A for the former students and Appendix B for the mentors. Based on the experience in this study, both researchers wanted to know how other universities conducted practicum experiences. That was the impetus for establishing Phase II. The questions that were asked in Phase I were not included in Phase II of the study and Phase II was more like a new separate study. Phase I was not dependent on Phase II, but Phase I sparked the interest to set up the national survey of Phase II.

Phase II consisted of a national survey that was sent to interpreting programs throughout the United States. This survey was more in depth than the survey used in Phase I. It was in fact a brand-new study, with 37 questions that asked about the practicum course design. The surveys were sent to 128 Interpreting Program Coordinators. This list of programs was compiled by referencing the list of programs on the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf’s website, http://rid.org, and cross-referencing that list with the programs listed on the website www.discoverinterpreting.org. In order to ensure accuracy, the lists of programs were compared and then checked to see if the interpreting program was still in operation. We identified the current program coordinator via the websites, phone, or email. On the two websites, 144 programs were listed; however, after checking, we found that only 132 programs were actually interpreting programs as opposed to Deaf Studies or ASL Studies programs. Contact information for the program coordinators was available for 128 programs. Of the 128 Interpreting Programs that the survey was emailed to, 40 programs responded to the survey, which is a 32% response rate.

Participants

The Phase I survey was sent to 232 mentors and 61 recent graduates. Forty-one mentors responded to the survey which is a 17% response rate, and 31 recent graduates responded, which is a 50% response rate. Three of the 41 mentors had worked with both CCBC and Bloomsburg students over the years. Twenty-six mentors had only
worked with CCBC students and 12 had only worked with Bloomsburg students. Out of those respondents, eight mentors and 10 recent graduates participated in the focus group. The investigator from CCBC interviewed mentors and then recent graduates from her program and the investigator from Bloomsburg interviewed the mentors and then recent graduates from her program. The mentors were in one focus group and the recent graduates met in a separate group; they did not participate in the same group. They were also separated by institution as previously mentioned.

In Phase II, the survey was sent to 128 Interpreting Programs nationally. At the time the data was analyzed for this presentation there were responses from 40 interpreting programs. The survey was sent out to interpreting program coordinators.

Data Analysis

The data was analyzed by first adding up the responses to yes/no questions and then reading the mentors’ responses and identifying recurring themes. The recent graduates’ surveys were analyzed in the same way. The responses that could be counted are detailed in figures 1 and 2.

In Phase II the survey respondent data was in a spreadsheet format and was sorted to separate the BA degree programs from the AA degree programs. For this presentation, only certain questions were analyzed related specifically to the proposed topic. Some of the items examined for this presentation were the number of practicum hours required, if the practicums were supervised by a mentor the full time, part of the time, or whether the student was allowed to interpret with no supervision, how many of the hours had to be supervised, and if there were other tasks besides interpreting that were required (e.g. community service, observations, workshop attendance, etc.).

Findings

Phase I

The survey responses and the focus group comments by the mentors demonstrate that the majority of the students were prepared to start their practicum. Twenty-three (54%) of the 41 mentors noted that when the practicum started, the interns were at the level they expected. Eleven (26%) commented that some students were and some were not ready. Seven (16%) noted that the students were not at the level that the mentor had expected and one (2%) was not sure.

Interestingly, by the end of the practicum only 16 (39%) of the 41 mentors felt the students were at entry-level skill for a new interpreter. Twelve (34%) said it depended on the student. Only two (4.8%) said no, the student was not at entry-level skill, and nine (21%) said they were unsure. Based on the typed comments, it seems the reason why many respondents chose “unsure” was due to the fact that at CCBC, students work with many different interpreters and it is possible that some of the respondents did not have the opportunity to see the student from beginning to end and therefore were unsure of their abilities by the end of the practicum. Bloomsburg’s program however, requires the student to work with the same mentor over the span of the practicum. The student could work with other mentors, but the main mentor would work with the student a minimum of 50% of the time. The mentors from Bloomsburg commented that they liked being able to see the student from the beginning to the end of the
practicum, seeing the students implement feedback and growing. This also ties into CCBC mentors’ comments during the focus group, where they said they would prefer to work with the same student throughout the practicum.

The survey asked the mentor and the former student to choose which area they felt was the weakest – from the mentor perspective and the student perspective. Figure 1 and Figure 2 show that the mentors and the former students had similar responses in their perception of areas where the mentees were the weakest. This provides important data for interpreting programs to use in making curriculum changes.

**Figure 1  Overall, what area is the weakest in students whom you have mentored?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>ASL- English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>English – ASL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure 2  Overall, what area do/did you feel is/was the weakest for you while you were in practicum?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Respondents</th>
<th>Skill</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Confidence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>ASL- English</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>English – ASL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Professionalism</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Themes that Emerged from Former Students.** During the focus group interviews, the former students were asked several questions about their experiences during the practicum and what benefitted them the most related to skill development. The former students commented that what helped them the most in their skill development was immediate feedback after the assignment was completed. The former students liked the chance to sit down and
debrief with the mentor about the interpreting assignment. In addition, the time spent before the assignment to go over the topic, what signs will be used, and background information on the participants was beneficial. The former students wished that there were opportunities to video record their work and then sit down with the mentor to go back and look over the interpretation and process it together.

**Themes that Emerged from the Mentors.** One theme that was stated by several mentors in the survey comments and focus group interviews was that they needed training in how to mentor, what the interpreting program’s expectations of a mentor are, and tools that can be used for skill development. During the interviews, mentors commented on what they do use for skill development activities. These tools included the National Consortium of Interpreter Education’s website, specifically the Mentor’s Toolkit, The Educational Interpreter Performance Assessment practice DVDs, and the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf’s (RID) National Interpreter Certification practice DVDs. Some of the mentors reported that not only did former students do interpreting activities (assignments separate from the interpreted event); some mentors also gave the former students ethical scenarios for them to work through to help prepare them for the RID performance test.

**Phase II**

Based on Phase I data showing that both mentors and former students stated they wanted to work with one interpreter instead of a variety of interpreters, we looked at questions that related specifically to this topic. We categorized and labelled two groups, one as a “freelance” design where students work with an interpreter who acts as a “supervisor” and supervises a student on that particular assignment, but does not have a lasting relationship with that student. The second category we named a “designated” design which means that the student is paired with an interpreter mentor (or the student could have more than one placement, but is designated to work with one interpreter) for the majority of the practicum. Out of the 40 respondents, 20 AA and BA programs followed the designated mentor design, 14 followed the freelance design and six did not respond to this item. We found that both AA and BA programs used both approaches and there was not one that strongly favored the one approach over the other.

In addition to having a freelance style or designated mentor style, some interpreting programs do not use either of these styles and students conduct their practicum without mentors. This means that no mentor is present to work with the student, provide feedback, or correct errors that may be made. Twenty-two out of the 40 colleges that responded reported that the students’ interpreting hours must be supervised. Five reported that most of the interpreting hours must be supervised. Please note that we used the term “most” but some programs did not define what “most” meant in the comment area. Two programs listed a specific number of hours that had to be supervised and that could be unsupervised. Nine programs said that the hours could be unsupervised; one said both supervised and unsupervised, but did not give an hour limit for each; and one program did not answer this question. The data shows that supervision requirements in practicum courses vary across programs.

When examining the structure of the practicum, most programs required hours other than interpreting. The hours included observation of interpreters, pre-conferencing, debriefing, preparing for assignments, and service learning experiences. The AA program practicum hours ranged from 75-320 hours. Out of those hours, 25–200 hours were actual interpreting. Most of the interpreting hours fell between 80–150 hours. For BA programs, practicum hours ranged from 45+ - 560 hours. The interpreting hours were 95-500 actual interpreting. Most of the programs required between 200–300 interpreting hours (see Figure 3). Out of all the Interpreting Programs AA and BA combined, the most common number of practicum hours was 300, with seven programs reporting this number. This number is in line with the Commission on Collegiate Interpreter Education (CCIE) accreditation standards (CCIE, 2014). There is a desire from mentees to have the mentor work on skill development outside of the interpreting assignment. Based on the respondents in Phase II, 63% of AA programs and 85% of BA programs
report they do have mentors who work on skill development with their mentees. However, the majority of programs do not require mentors to do this.

Figure 3 AA and BA Program Total Hours Required. Diamond = BA, Square = AA

Conclusion

As can be seen from the data, there is no current standard for practicum requirements in interpreting programs. Each program that responded to the survey required a different number of hours, some require or permit unsupervised hours, and some require all hours to be supervised. Some programs follow a “freelance style” while others a
“designated style” of mentoring, and some require other activities besides just interpreting as part of the practicum. As stated above, this is based on just a portion of the survey responses that were collected. We anticipate publishing more in-depth findings once all the data is analyzed.

Acknowledgements

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References