

Realtime Captioning: Access Equal Success

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What is Realtime? What does it do? Who uses it? Who benefits from it? What does it cost? What's in that black case? We hope to answer all these questions and more in today's presentation. We would also like to briefly tell you where we are from and the mission we are charged with in support of students who are deaf and hard of hearing.

The National Center on Deafness (NCOD) is a model comprehensive support service program for deaf and hard of hearing students enrolled in an integrated setting. Its primary goal is to make all university services fully accessible to this population. Support services include interpreting, notetaking, tutoring, counseling, career development and placement, assistance to faculty and staff who work with deaf individuals, and most recently, Realtime captioning in classrooms and other campus venues. We have captioned meetings for Brenda Wilson, President of California State University, Northridge and also for President Bill Clinton when he visited our campus after the 1994 earthquake.

Today NCOD provides support for approximately 250 students who are deaf and hard of hearing, more than any other mainstream campus in the United States. In addition, NCOD responds to over 300 calls per week requesting information on deafness, support services, higher education and many, many calls about Realtime captioning.

Staff and students at NCOD realized that not everyone in the classroom was benefiting from traditional services such as interpreting and notetaking. Alternative solutions were sought, and Realtime captioning appeared to be another option in meeting these needs. We have been using Realtime in the classroom since 1992, and its growth has been unprecedented. A video illustrating the use of Realtime in and out of the classroom was included as part of the conference presentation.

Realtime began at CSUN in the fall semester of 1992 in one class, three hours of service weekly, with one captionist -- Sandy Eisenburg. The student response has been phenomenal, and Realtime currently serves over 160 classroom hours per week with new requests coming regularly.

In August, 1994 NCOD hosted a seminar in academic Realtime captioning. The response was outstanding, with over 200 participants in attendance. Consequently, we began our Realtime training program in January 1995 and currently employ 11 hourly captionists and a Realtime coordinator. A sample training outline and schedule are available from the authors. The training program has been quite successful, and we are often complimented on our captionists' precision, professionalism, and quality of their work, as well as their friendliness.

Equipment used for classroom Realtime consists of a court stenograph machine linked to an IBM-compatible laptop computer. Software used is RAPIDTEXT and WordPerfect 6 for DOS, which allows control of font size, style and color as well as student access through the computer keyboard at the same time the captionist is hooked through the stenograph. We also hook up to TV's using an inexpensive VGA to TV converter, allowing many students to view. Other devices, options, and specifications are also available from the authors.

Realtime captionists stenographically record all classroom proceedings, including lecture and student commentary. Students are usually identified as male or female student, although proper names may be used to identify speakers as well. Special notations are used as indicators to prompt students to look at a chalkboard or large map or to show when the professor is demonstrating something. We include blurbs such as "laughter" so our students will get the flavor of what is happening. And if there is an uncaptioned film shown or no decoder available, we will caption what is said on that film (although these captions will not imprint on the film itself; that is a different process).

Students are responsible for bringing diskettes to our student copy center where a hard copy is printed out after class and distributed to the students who are deaf and hard of hearing. These notes are also used by professors to help prepare their lectures and by interpreters, notetakers, and tutors to provide technical vocabulary and class information for tutoring sessions. A pilot classroom note sales program for hearing students in classes already served by Realtime has been initiated by the University through the Associated Students organization. In addition, computerized or hard copy is available for captioning of any event, and many times this eliminates need for a secretary to take handwritten notes.

Because Realtime is a dual service, providing both instant display of the spoken word and a hard copy of proceedings, we can usually use a captionist to substitute for an interpreter or a notetaker or sometimes both. Additionally, captionists are generally able to work for a longer period of time than interpreters. Given one 20-minute or two 10-minute breaks, captionists are able to work in classes up to three hours in duration. Realtime can also be transmitted remotely to other locations via modem connection. With all these uses and options, one can see that Realtime can be a very extensive and cost-effective service.

You are probably wondering who gets Realtime services in the classroom and how classes, Realtime captionists, and students are matched. Providing the service that a student requests in the classroom begins late in the previous semester. Registration for the fall semester usually occurs in May of the previous spring. Students meet with an NCOD counselor and fill out a schedule of classes. Their classes are listed on *WIBC* cards (Who's In Which Class). At this time the counselors and students decide if Realtime captioning is their choice for some or all of their classes. We strongly suggest to students who really benefit from Realtime to request it at registration time in order to ensure filling their request.

Services are color-coded on the *WIBC* cards and yellow is the color we have designated for Realtime service.

Sometimes it is obvious to the staff that Realtime Captioning will be needed for a very oral student who does not sign or a late-deafened individual who is not yet comfortable in any communication mode. Some students know nothing about Realtime and are exposed to it here in a class where another student requested it, and suddenly a whole new world of understanding is opened up.

There are no hard and fast rules about who gets Realtime. Some students may request it after the semester begins, especially in a very technical class where words are long and difficult to spell. Once a word is entered in the captionist's dictionary, it will generally always be spelled correctly. We have found that very, very few students give up Realtime once they have it in a class. At the NCOD we work together as a team, so anyone in any department may see that a student is not progressing with traditional service and may suggest Realtime as another *access to success*.

For some students, Realtime has made the difference between success and failure. Having equal access to information, commentary, and the repartee and joking which are a normal part of everyday classroom activity opens up the university to these students, and they are able to interact and be a part of the class. Realtime gives them the opportunity to excel, and this has been reflected academically in their grades, as well as in some students' demeanor, attitudes, and even the way they dress and carry themselves.

Evaluation of Realtime captionists by students occurs every semester at about the midterm point; to date, the response has been overwhelmingly positive. We have found that the great majority of students who have had Realtime request it for future classes. As the Realtime coordinator, Sandy also observes the captionists from time to time, reviews their raw notes, and gives an evaluation. In general, our captionists produce excellent work and are continually improving. They appreciate the atmosphere of support we offer and truly enjoy serving our students.

Of course, Realtime is not a flawless communication method, nor is it a panacea. One drawback occurs when serving non-oral students. Since most captionists are not fluent signers, these students must type on the computer keyboard or write notes for the captionist to voice. However, since we have such a large deaf student population at CSUN, some of our classes are also served with an interpreter. We do have some non-oral students who request Realtime because of the extensive vocabulary it provides. If funding is available, NCOD plans to purchase additional laptop computers to allow more students to individually hook up to the captionist's computer, thus expanding interactive potential.

There is always the possibility of equipment failure. If this happens, our captionists will take handwritten notes. We try to keep extra equipment on hand in case such a problem arises. It is also very important for providers of Realtime services to have technical support readily available for hardware, software, and video technology.

For labs or extremely diagrammatic, demonstrative, or contextual classes, Realtime may not be the ideal service because it is literally text on screen. However, sometimes these classes work out better than expected; it really depends on the individual class and student. Realtime notes can be very long because they are a complete record of classroom proceedings and not a condensation or outline of main points. They contain all the material, both extraneous and essential, and some students complain about this.

However, many students are able to take their own abbreviated handwritten notes from the Realtime screen. Some students actually view this as an opportunity to learn a new skill, notetaking, which they were unable to do themselves using an interpreter or lipreading.

At the National Center on Deafness, we see a very bright future for Realtime captioning and its many uses. Service requests are always increasing. In our future outreach activities, we will attempt to contact more learning institutions through the distance learning center at California State University, Northridge's Oviatt library and will provide Realtime workshops as well.