

Literature Comes Alive

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Abstract

“Literature Comes Alive” was a joint project involving deaf students and (hearing) interpreting students at a community college. The project involved the deaf students’ translations of classic literature into American Sign Language and the voicing of the stories by students in the Interpreter Education Program. An overall goal of the project was to empower deaf students to help them become independent, confident, and responsible. An academic goal was to teach classic literature. A major goal for the interpreter students was to experience the entire process of preparing for a voice-interpreted performance. The student response was overwhelmingly positive. Deaf and hearing students benefited, both personally and professionally. “Literature Comes Alive” is now an annual event at Camden County College.

In 1998, two employees of Camden County College (CCC), Dianne Falvo, Assistant Professor of English, and Maureen Brady, Support Services/Interpreter Coordinator, shared a common vision: to create a joint project involving deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing students at the Blackwood Campus in New Jersey. This collaboration came to fruition two years later in a performance known as “Literature Comes Alive.” In April 2000, the first group of students from the MidAtlantic Post-Secondary Center for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (the Center) and students from the Interpreter Education Program participated in a wonderful learning experience as they worked together to present the works of famous authors. The deaf students signed classic literature in American Sign Language, and the interpreter students voiced these stories into spoken English.

Goals for Deaf Students

There were a number of goals for the deaf students. First, students would be given the opportunity to do something truly unique outside of class. This project aimed to help students become more independent and responsible as well as make them feel proud and successful.

Many deaf students were not familiar with literature when they started taking classes at CCC. One student asked who Edgar Allan Poe was. That student ended up signing a Poe story for the first performance in the year 2000. By participating in the performance, deaf students received an exciting introduction to classic literature.

Another goal for the deaf students was to help them compare and contrast English and ASL. Many deaf students are accustomed to reading and signing at the same time. This attempt to overlap the two languages gives the false impression that the two languages are similar in grammar and structure. The translation work involved in the production helped students realize some major differences between ASL and English.

One last objective for deaf students was to provide them with an opportunity to work closely with voice interpreters. Some of the deaf students had used interpreters prior to their arrival at CCC; others had not. Few, if any of the deaf students, had experience in rehearsing a story and working collaboratively with a voice interpreter.

Goals for the Interpreting Students

The initial goals for the interpreting students seemed obvious. The hearing students were to gain knowledge about theatrical interpreting, network with deaf and hard of hearing students and staff members on campus, and experience a sense of accomplishment. Students would learn that hard work and dedication were required in order to be successful.

Preparation of the Deaf Storytellers

For the first two performances, all work began in January for shows that took place in April. This turned out to be a great deal of work squeezed into the spring semesters. This past year, the storytellers began their work in the fall. They chose a story, book, or play (short stories were preferred, for the simple reason that they are short). Several of the students read a number of stories before making their selection; others were satisfied with the first story they read. On one occasion, a story was assigned to a student, because another had backed out. A student biographer had already begun working on that particular author, so the author and story were kept. Next, students wrote summaries of their stories, and revisions were made. By the time January rolled around, most of the summaries were finished.

An interesting group of stories and authors headlined

each performance. The authors whose stories were chosen for the first two performances included: Edgar Allan Poe, O'Henry, Sir Arthur Conan, Bram Stoker, Jane Austen, Louisa May Alcott, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Langston Hughes. This year the stories and authors were:

“The Black Cat” by Edgar Allan Poe;
“The Ransom of Red Chief” by O'Henry;
The Count of Monte Cristo by Alexander Dumas;
Oliver Twist by Charles Dickens;
“All Summer in Day” by Ray Bradbury; and
“The Star Child” by Oscar Wilde.

The next step was to find ASL coaches who were comfortable translating stories into ASL. It is helpful to determine exactly how many hours each coach can devote to translation work. Some deaf students are fluent in ASL, so the translation assistance they needed was minimal. Others, who were not fluent, needed a great deal of help. One student needed a coach to gloss every line of his story into ASL. Coaches worked with each of the students, even those who knew the language. Coaches made sure that spatial relationships were clear, role shift and eye gaze were used effectively, appropriate classifiers were signed, and so forth.

Regular rehearsals came next. For the first two performances, group rehearsals were held. Too often, the rehearsal room was overcrowded, especially if only one coach was in the room. This past year, coaches worked with the students individually. This turned out to be less chaotic and more productive. Thus began the process of the deaf students memorizing their stories. By mid-February, students attended rehearsals from one to four times per week.

After the deaf students learned their stories, they signed the stories for another member of the Center. A fresh perspective was needed. If a deaf person had helped them translate, students went to a hearing staff member for feedback and vice versa. Staff members ensured that what was signed was accurate and clear. The time commitment for rehearsals was tremendous. The students knew that preparing for the performance required a great deal of time and effort.

Preparation of Biographers

The deaf biographers had an interesting task. They read about the authors' lives and decided what information to include in a short biography. If a biographer planned to include a minor facet of an author's life while overlooking a major contribution, he was steered in the right direction. Otherwise, the biographers selected information themselves. For the first two performances, students worked in groups of two for this portion of the preparation. This year each biographer worked independently. Just as the storytellers did, the biographers wrote English summaries, and revisions were made. The students wrote ten to twelve facts

about each author's life. Again, the students had to meet with ASL coaches. Some biographers translated their information on their own; others relied on the coaches for accurate translations into ASL. Deaf consultants assisted in the translations. Finally, the biographers were ready for rehearsals, which took place one to four times per week.

Preparation of Interpreting Students

Preparing the interpreter training students for the task of voice interpreting the performances involved many factors. All of the students were members of a voice interpreting class at the college taught by Ms. Janice Beyer. Weekly class lessons provided the students with general strategies for voicing a performance. Additional information sessions focused on the various aspects of the individual biographies and stories to prepare for voicing.

The hearing students selected a story or an author. Those who chose an author were assigned a second one as well. Each hearing student received the deaf student's written summary of the story or biography. In addition, interpreting students were encouraged to read the book or short story itself. If a movie version was available, they watched it. Research related to the author and setting enabled the interpreting student to gain a better understanding of the story and make appropriate vocabulary choices.

Several factors are necessary in order for voice interpreters to provide a dynamic equivalence of the text. They must understand the source text and its meaning and create an equivalent target text. Ensuring that all the members of the audience would have the same understanding of the storyteller's message, whether perceived through American Sign Language or English, the voicing students required a great deal of coaching. An interesting phenomenon was that the translations prepared by the deaf students became the source text for the interpreting students. The original piece of classic literature was summarized, translated into ASL, and re-interpreted into English (Cerney, 2000).

The task of the interpreting students was to convey the meaning of the original message while retaining the mood, tone, and overall affect of the storyteller. In order to maintain the integrity of the message, the student interpreters considered several factors that are outlined below (Cerney, 2000).

Feedback was provided on vocabulary choices. Students were discouraged from voicing the deaf student's summary as it was written. They were encouraged to select English vocabulary words, based on the time period of the story and specific geographic location, if indicated. Students examined the characters and settings to determine the appropriate language register. The hearing students videotaped the storytellers, studied the signed delivery, and became familiar with the storyteller's signing style. The various characters along

with the theme of the story were examined at length in order to ensure a smooth delivery. The intonation and emotional quality of the interpreter's voice had to match the source text.

It was necessary for the interpreting students to use proper English grammar. Information needed to flow in coherent phrases, clauses, and sentences. The pace was monitored so that words did not sound rushed or slow. This would have made the text sound over-simplified or disconnected. Students were encouraged to monitor transitions between clauses and sentences. They provided feedback for each other on the clarity of their speech. Were the words pronounced correctly? Discourse markers – such as, “well,” “okay,” “you know,” and “like” – were monitored. Did the student have a whispery voice? Cultural adjustments were made where appropriate. This enabled the concepts being voiced to make sense in English. Volume was noted. Was the student's voice too loud or too soft? Were the students too close to the microphone while they spoke? Could the backup interpreter be heard when feeding the primary interpreter? Could conversation between the two be heard? Students practiced voicing with confidence to instill audience trust in the interpreter (Cerney, 2000). Ms. Beyer attended rehearsals and gave both oral and written feedback to her students on these factors.

Each storyteller and biographer had one voice interpreter and one backup. Since the hearing students had limited experiences in interpreting, they were not familiar with the process of team interpreting. Instruction in this area included team protocol. Both students in a team had to be familiar with the primary and secondary material, i.e., their own story and the story of the person they were backing up. Students practiced feeding the working interpreter, receiving information from the backup, and signaling for help when needed.

Formal Rehearsals for Deaf Students

One important element of formal rehearsals involved the stage. Walking on and off stage with ease was crucial. Something as simple as a change in lighting could make normal walking difficult. Stage rehearsals were also helpful in observing students' posture, mannerisms, and overall movement. Signing had to be clear to people from a distance. Name signs had to be understood. Also, students were asked to stand in the center of the stage unless they were taking on the role of various characters in their story.

Once on stage, students learned to pace themselves and sign slowly enough for an audience to follow along. The first time one student signed her story she completed a four-and-a-half page story in only five minutes. Students were reminded that the audience would see each story only once. If audience members missed a sign or if they did not know which character was being portrayed, there was no going back. Sometimes the only reminder that a student needed to slow down was

to see a voice interpreter with a microphone in her hand. The student whose story initially ran for five minutes was able to stretch out her story to eleven minutes on the day of the performance.

Formal Rehearsals for Interpreting Students

Formal rehearsals enabled the interpreting students to become familiar with the logistics and equipment to be used on the day of the performance. They studied the setup of the room to establish their placement in the setting. The hearing students began to get a feel for the room so they could prepare themselves to voice for an audience. They noted the lighting and the lighting sequences to be used during the actual performance. Students needed time to adapt to the use of microphones so that they would not be distracted by the sound of their own voices over the microphone. They practiced changes in volume so that an appropriate volume level would be used in a crowded auditorium. The interpreting students also familiarized themselves with their storyteller's or biographer's stage entrance, placement, and exit.

Delegating Work

One important lesson learned about doing a performance such as “Literature Comes Alive” is to find energetic people and delegate work to them. Having dependable people assisting in the process helped to alleviate the amount of work for which each person was responsible.

One student, Modekhai Globman, made a PowerPoint presentation to introduce each biographer, storyteller, and interpreter, and this year he added pictures of each student to his PowerPoint presentation. Another addition to this year's computer presentation was a collage of pictures depicting the September 11th attacks. Modekhai developed the idea of honoring victims and their families in this manner.

Three staff people at the Center made invaluable contributions to the performance. The first was the Center's Program Assistant, Ms. Kathy Earp, who graciously agreed to create this year's program. She studied earlier programs and their format and then experimented with fonts, colors, and styles. The result was the best program we have had. The second life-saver within the Center was the secretary, Ms. Pat Stens. She made certificates for each storyteller, biographer, and interpreter. Last, but certainly not least, we are indebted to the Center's Program Director, Ms. Josie Durkow, for without her support, the shows would never have existed.

A signed performance cannot be done without having a videotape to keep for posterity. The coordinator of the Interpreter Training Program, Mr. Paul Klucsarits, and the husband of one of our storytellers, Mr. Victor Collazo, stood on opposite sides of the stage and taped the entire program. Many of the performers and interpreters had copies of the video made after the

performance. These tapes turned out to be a hot commodity at the Center.

CCC is fortunate to have “signing communities,” groups of deaf and hearing people working together for a common goal. The president of one such community, Ms. Donna Keen, took responsibility for passing out programs and serving refreshments on the day of the performance. Ms. Keen’s group arrived early, set up their snacks, and performed all-around last-minute tasks.

Rewards for Deaf Students

Saying that the goals were met is an understatement. The deaf students were extremely proud of themselves for their hard work and dedication and were excited about their contribution to the performance. The show ran smoothly, the students put on the *best* performance yet, and the audience was extremely impressed. At the end of the performance, students, their families, and friends shared in the excitement. One audience member stated that these stories truly came alive on stage. The sense of accomplishment that the students felt made every hour of work worthwhile.

The academic goals were also met. The deaf students learned about famous stories and their authors. They worked diligently to understand the differences between English and ASL. Deaf students became more responsible and independent. Hopefully, these skills will carry over into students’ content course work.

Some of the performers have already begun discussing the type of story they will select next year. One wants to tell a sad story; another wants the audience to laugh. In this way, students feel connected to Camden County College and what the Center can offer them.

Rewards for Interpreting Students

On many levels, this was a wonderful educational experience for the hearing students. It helped prepare the interpreting students for future assignments as they acquired confidence through practical experience. The investment of their time and the comfortable environment resulted in a successful voicing job. It was an excellent cultural experience as well. The students learned a great deal by working with two languages. Students formed relationships with each other and with the deaf and hard of hearing students. Each hearing student gained an understanding of the complexity of voice interpreting a performance, as well as a greater appreciation for classic literature. The initial goals for completing this project were greatly surpassed.

References

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