

Continuing Education for Speech-to-Text Providers: A Fundamental Piece of the Puzzle

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Abstract

One of the most important pieces of the "high-quality speech-to-text service puzzle" is on-going skill development, for both service providers and supervisors overseeing service delivery programs. The Speech-to-Text Services Network (STSN) has made the on-going skill development of those in the speech-to-text community one of its primary missions. This presentation provided details about the STSN Continuing Education Project, including the Professional Development Recognition Program. It also demonstrated several of the "remote" learning tools developed by STSN. These include an on-line tool for service provider skill enhancement, which includes audio practice materials, self-journaling/feedback forms, and progress tracking forms. Audience participants had the opportunity to work with one of these continuing education tools.



Providing Continuing Education Opportunities

Continuing education for speech to text providers is a primary focus of STSN, the Speech to Text Services Network. So, why is continuing education good? For one thing, it helps individuals to grow, and it helps to grow our profession. Who of you who have background or familiarity with the Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID)? Almost everybody in here. Continuing education is one of the foundations of RID—to help interpreters to grow, develop, and mature in their profession and to help move the profession forward. That's the same model that we're trying to move forward with STSN: we in the speech-to text-field need much more than just the initial training, whether it be for CART, C-Print, or TypeWell.

Continuing education is also important for motivation. Whenever we participate in training and come to presentations like this, it's motivating. For those of you who are service providers, when you go to conferences like this, we hope you go away recharged or more integrated. We also hope that you use the new technologies or ideas you picked up from workshops and networking with others. Continuing education motivates us to move forward.

Continuing education gives recognition to the profession. Whenever we start advertising upcoming workshops, people start questioning, "What is this about exactly?" It gives recognition to us as professionals; it shows that we are interested in the profession and the STSN organization, as well as ourselves as individuals.

In general, when you think about training, you think about conferences and workshops. However, although we emphasize participating in conferences and workshops, there also are other avenues to get continuing education.

There were many speech-to-text presentations at the PEPNet conference. For those people unable to attend those sessions, the conference proceedings will be available online later this year.

Other workshops are happening, too. In June 2008, the National Center on Deafness will have several speech-to-text sessions at their Summer Institute in Northridge, California. There will be an Advanced TypeWell training in Fall 2008 in the New York City area. The Western Network of Communication Access Providers (WNCAP) will have a conference in Spring of 2009; for more information, go to the wncap.net website.

Some workshops cover skills in specific types of services, such as TypeWell, C-Print, and CART. Within STSN, we strongly promote workshops that are applicable to all service providers, regardless of what mode of speech-to-text services they use. Some of the issues covered include time management and business ethics; however, addressing technology training may or may not be specific to the type of service provided. C-Print and TypeWell service providers use laptop computers, and both of groups need to know general technology, networking, and related issues. Other important areas include writing skills, English grammar, syntax, and proper punctuation.

Working on a “Grassroots” Level

Within STSN, we also promote "grassroots" continuing education activities, in response to the difficulty many people currently have traveling to conferences. One problem people face is money issues. Another issue is that flying these days is awful. Therefore, one way for people to get continuing education is to offer it in their local areas.

One example of this is a conference that happened recently in Knoxville. The University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK) hosted a cognitive processing workshop for both interpreters and speech-to-text service providers. It was presented by a local Knoxville woman. It was a great example of reaching out to experts in a local area. It's not just the content from the podium that's presented—it's the opportunity to network with colleagues.

Another example is the Western Network of Communication Access Providers (WNCAP) model. It was established by staff at five colleges in the Oregon and Washington area who offered speech-to-text services. They understood that those people needed and wanted continuing education, and they created opportunities to get together. Portland Community College donated or provided the space for the conferences in 2005, 2006 and 2007. There will be another WNCAP conference in Spring 2009.

Planning an Activity

How can you plan and host a grassroots conference? What is offered at a conference like this besides a keynote address? People who are already instructors and used to teaching gave presentations on various topics. There were sessions on ethics and ergonomics, as well as skill-building opportunities for both C-Print and TypeWell service providers. Service providers also can give presentations, because service providers who are experienced at doing this job are a rich resource.

Another interesting session is to provide a consumer panel. At a past conference, we had three people on the panel—each consumer used a different type of service and each had his/her preferred service provided as access during the panel discussion.

In the series of WNCAP workshops, we felt it was important to demonstrate the idea of not having competition among the types of services. That's not what this profession and these grassroots events are all about. It's about the consumers. Different services for different people. But we all need to know about each other, and we can learn from each other.

WNCAP conferences have included sessions relevant to all service types. For example, there was a CART writer who presented on different theories of CART writing. C-Print and TypeWell professionals went to that session because everybody wants to know what the other guy's doing. We also had a demonstration by three people: one providing TypeWell, one providing C-Print, another one providing CART. Conference participants could walk around and see the different services. That was a very well-liked opportunity for conference attendees.

We encourage you to set up your own "grassroots" workshop, using either the UTK "one presenter" model, or the WNCAP "multiple presenters" model. To help you do that, there is a handout that can be downloaded from the Continuing Education link of the STSN website. This file provides a timeline of things that you have to do to plan and put on a grassroots workshop.

What are some possible funding resources? Consider contacting your PEPNet regional representative. Because ongoing professional development is an important service provided by PEPNet, there may be some interest in working together to address training needs. Although PEPNet funds may not cover the entire cost of the activity, it may help to get this started. A nominal registration fee might be charged to cover other costs.

In addition to PEPNet, STSN is another group that is working to set up regional workshops, with the goal of having regional workshops available in different areas. Shannon Aylesworth is the current STSN president. Within the next two years, STSN would like to support two to four workshops. Although STSN might not be able to provide much financial support, it is an excellent resource for helping to organize an activity.

In planning a continuing education activity, think about where and when it will occur. To decide *where*, think about how many people you want. One strategy is to limit the initial event to a specific number of people. Make sure that the venue selected can handle that many. Locating a site for 30-40 people is much easier than locating a site for a conference as large as the PEPNet conference!

Next is deciding when the event will occur. Remember that service providers need to be in the classroom and their supervisors need to be at work. Weekend workshops often work well; however, if people are traveling long distances, consider the impact on their schedule. It's difficult to travel for only one day, and it's also important to return home early enough on Sunday night to be ready for work the next day.

The next issue is to plan for the *what* and the *who* of the presentations. Let the needs of the audience guide the planning process. For WNCAP, we asked the service providers in the area, "What do you want to know about?" Along with the *what* is the *who*. Consider whether or not you will pay the presenters. Some presenters—really great presenters you'd want to invite—will require travel and other fees. It may be necessary to look into other funding sources.

You also need to plan for *how* to do the event. It may be necessary to get an event bank account and decide who's going to receive the checks. If you're working with an educational institution, such as UTK's workshop, the school might be willing to receive the checks and process payments.

But if you are a true grassroots group and not supported by a school, somebody needs to function as the business manager, set up the bank account, write checks, and handle other issues related to money.

Planning for interpreters and speech-to-text service providers and paying them is another important component. Advertising can be done by using the listservs, your institution's website, and other resources like that. It's important to reach out to as many people as you can to generate interest in the activity.

What should happen on the day of the event? One big thing people forget is good signage to tell people how to get from the parking lot to the meeting room. A registration table that's staffed all the time is necessary because people show up and want to register late. Plan for snacks and/or beverages during breaks; if it's an all-day event, consider what lunch options might be. Finally, prepare conference feedback forms for people to complete, and designate a place for them to be collected. Prepare attendance certificates, and schedule a time and place for those to be distributed.

Within a week after the activity, send thank you notes to people, the panel, the interpreters, and service providers. Appoint someone from the planning group to summarize and analyze the feedback sheets. By analyzing the feedback, you will learn what to do differently the next year.

There is a planning timeline that can be downloaded from the STSN website. In addition, STSN is creating an online repository to store presentations and workshops being done all over the country.

Professional Development Units

Because STSN values continuing education, we have established Professional Development Units (PDUs). It's a concept that is similar to Continuing Education Units (CEUs). These PDUs have been designed specifically for speech-to-text providers.

Why are we using the term "Professional Development Unit" instead of "Continuing Education Unit?" There are several reasons. The main reason is that STSN as an organization is not ready yet for CEUs. We don't have an organizational certification structure. Not all of the speech-to-text systems have their own certification available. We cannot make CEUs a requirement for members because there's not an instrument by which we can do so. More information about the Professional Development Project and related application forms can be access from the continuing education link of the STSN website.

How does someone accumulate PDUs? Currently, getting PDUs is voluntary, but they are only offered to STSN members. Send in the PDU form and supporting documentation to the Continuing Education chairperson for approval. As indicated in the previous paragraph, the form is online at STSN.org, under "Continuing Education." Prior approval is not needed, and recipients have up to six months after an activity to submit paperwork.

It's important to note that the activities do not have to be specific to speech-to-text services for a participant to accumulate PDUs. As discussed in other professional organizations, there often are other topics and issues that will benefit a speech-to-text provider. For example, workshops at the PEPNet conference on topics other than speech-to-text services are available for STSN PDUs.

Although attending a workshop in person is one way to accumulate PDUs, STSN also offers two self-study options. The first self-study option currently available is at the website <http://textcaptioning.com>. It is not necessary to be a member of STSN to use this online resource. This site is open to anyone.

There are many online resources that offer audio files that can be used for practice. However, not all audio files are presented at a good rate or offer good content for current speech-to-text providers to use as practice. Some have a lot of “dead air” that can be frustrating when trying to use it to increase speed or improve accuracy. To address this, we organized some audio files from a variety of sources. Using technical support, the files were run through an audio program so the speed was increased to a fast rate without distorting the sound. The “dead time” was removed so the files are just constant...and fast and difficult. These are not for your newbie trainees. They are for providers who are in the classroom, captioning/transcribing on a regular basis. These files are for people who need and want to challenge themselves and their skills. Your skills will not improve until you’re in more challenging situations.

The second option is an online PowerPoint that includes a question-and-answer activity. We took a presentation by Joyce Dworsky, Sharon Downs and Cindy Camp from the PEPNet 2006 conference and made it available online. Each presenter addressed a different topic. We included a companion piece with a list of questions. If you've done online self-study activities before, you're probably familiar with this kind of approach. Basically, information is presented in a specific format, such as a PowerPoint presentation; the materials include a list of questions that reflect the important points offered by the presenter. The questions are in multiple-choice format. In this particular activity, there are 20 questions. To receive PDUs for this activity, a completed response form and the PDU application must be sent to the STSN Continuing Education chairperson.

In addition to the two options described above, there also may be other opportunities. It’s possible that several topics offered by Signs of Development would be very applicable for the self-study option within STSN. Additional activities for PDUs will be considered on a case-by-case basis.

In summary, STSN is striving to make continuing education available all over the country – in cities and rural areas alike. It encourages personal growth, motivation, and improvement of skills. Go out there and help make this happen.

