Feedback: A Conversation About 'The Work'
Between Learners and Colleagues
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Introduction

Feedback is an invaluable communication skill. It is information that flows between at least two people and relates to observations about what transpired during a given event. For the purposes of this article, the events being discussed are interpreted events and the observations are about the effectiveness of the interpreting work. The most useful observations are those based on knowledge of Sign Language, the interpreting process, the complexities of the process, and a desire to discuss language and process issues in order to enhance the effectiveness and productivity of working interpreters.

The focus of this article is how feedback can be useful and empowering. Specific strategies and considerations related to providing meaningful feedback as part of a dynamic learning environment will be addressed. These strategies and considerations are based on the belief that feedback is an invitation to interact and discuss observations as part of a dynamic communication process (Porter, 1982.) It is a process that does not assume that the giver is totally right and the receiver wrong. Rather, it promotes the learning of basic concepts for providing effective feedback, that when applied among individuals who are committed to professional growth and development, creates an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect (Porter, 1982.)

Collaborative learning, such as occurs in the FRCC Educational Interpreting Certificate Program (EICP), requires that learners interact with one another for the purpose of sharing observations and experiences. Collaborative learning is designed to foster student's self-awareness, exploration, and sense of themselves as 'knowers' capable of discovering answers and solutions through critical thinking and analysis (Slavin, 1988). Collaborative learning is designed to foster mutual respect and appreciation between and among learners, and among learners and teachers (Bruffee, 1987). To this end, the process of peer review and feedback is an integral part of the collaborative learning experience. As well, EICP students participate in and receive feedback from mentors and facilitators for the same purpose.

There are also practitioners who agree to create a collaborative learning environment within the context of their work relationships. This can occur when interpreters commit to engaging in professional discussions about their work, to review of the effectiveness of the work product, and to share feedback related to observations about each other's work. This can happen within the context of interpreting assignments involving teams of interpreters, within the context of study groups, or in a mentoring relationship. Again, the goal of the activity is to enhance overall effectiveness and productivity in the interpreting work.

Given the experiences most of us have had related to receiving feedback, we may be ill-prepared to think of feedback or use feedback as a communication skill. We may think of feedback mostly in its negative forms: a parent's thoughtless remark, a friend's careless comment, a stranger's insult, a teacher's criticism, or a supervisor's poor written evaluation. Because of the power differential that exists in these situations, we may not have had the ability to ask for clarification, to ask for suggestions for improvement, or to learn from the feedback (Porter, 1982). However, feedback between all learners—be they students, practitioners, teachers, or mentors—in a collaborative learning environment is intended to be useful and empowering.

What Characterizes Effective Feedback?

According to Porter (1982) there are three main characteristics of effective feedback.

- Effective feedback is information that can be heard by the receiver (as evidenced by the fact that she or he does not get defensive.)
- Effective feedback is information that keeps the relationship intact, open, and healthy (though not always devoid of conflict.)
- Effective feedback is information that validates the feedback process in future interactions (rather than avoiding it because it was 'so painful last time'.)

There are some additional characteristics of effective feedback that should also be considered (Cokely, Witter-Merithew, and Neumann Solow, 1995).

- Effective feedback is descriptive and specific.
- Effective feedback is non-judgmental.
- Effective feedback focuses on the product, the interpretation, not the individual.
- Effective feedback is motivated from a commitment to enhance the quality of interpretation performance and to advance the collegiality of practitioners.

Consider for example, these two samples of feedback between peers.

Sample One

"Overall, I think you did a pretty good job, but when I was watching you interpret I noticed you used some wrong signs in several places. You seemed to be nervous and you kept looking around. In one part, when the speaker was talking about interest rates, you didn't sign anything. You totally left that part out. That part was pretty important because without it, the use of the numbers didn't make any sense. But, I did notice you used good facial expression to show how upset she was when she had to fill out more paperwork for the bank and how thrilled she was when she finally got to drive her new car. The expressions were really good. Also, the part about the cars being parked in the lot at the dealers was real clear….I could see how they were lined up in rows. When you were fingerspelling it was jerky and some of the letters weren't clear. But otherwise, I thought it was a pretty decent job and you were able to keep up with the speaker."

Sample Two

"There were three features of the interpretation that I observed as being effective in representing what the speaker was discussing. The first was the use of space to set up the physical arrangement of the cars in the lot at the dealership. By using classifier handshapes and space, the cars were established in straight lines, in multiple rows. This showed the visual impact of the number of cars on the lot and was effective. The second feature I observed was the use of facial expressions to convey the emotional elements of the message. For example, when the speaker became upset at having to fill out more paperwork for the bank officer, the facial expression of a furrowed brow and a frown showed exasperation and frustration. This was consistent with the vocal inflection of the speaker. Another example occurred when the speaker was discussing her excitement when driving her new car home. The expression included wide eyes and a smile, demonstrating the excitement indicated in the vocal inflection. A third example relates to keeping up with the speaker. Signs were retrieved quickly and fluently during the interpretation, so that the majority of the speaker's comments were conveyed in a manner that allowed you to complete the interpretation at about the same time as the speaker. So, the use of space (with classifiers), the use of facial expression, and the retrieval of signs in a fluent and consistent manner were three features I observed as being effective.

There were two features of the work that I observed as being less-than-effective in representing the speaker's remarks. The first was semantics or how meaning was conveyed. For example, the sign used for 'bank loan' was the sign gloss 'money + borrow'. It is unknown from whom the money was borrowed or that it was a loan involving a scheduled payback process. Another example relates to the speaker's discussion that she had been looking for a car for some time. The interpretation stated 'happen (brief pause) look for car'. The use of the sign 'happen', followed by a brief pause, seemed to indicate that the search for a car was a recent and unexpected event. In one segment the concept of interest rates was omitted from the interpretation. This made the meaning of the percentages of 4% and 7% uncertain. One example of this occurred in the sentence, ' money+borrow car worth 7%'. The meaning of this part of the interpretation might be perceived to be that, "only 7% of the value of the car could be borrowed." This meaning is inconsistent with the intent of the speaker.

Another feature was fingerspelling. When spelling the make of the car, the name of the dealership, and the name on the salesman's name tag, some letters were omitted and the transition from letter to letter uneven. The unevenness occurred when the hand moved up and down when transitioning from letter to letter. So, focusing on production of fingerspelled items and in conveying the meaning of the message would make the interpretation more consistent with the speaker."

Effective Feedback: An Analysis

Both examples are addressing the same sample of work. One is more brief and direct, while the other is more elaborated. Which one provides more specific information about the interpreting work? Which example would be more useful and empowering to you as a learner? The description of behaviors, supported by specific examples of when the behavior was observed, provides information that can be used for reflection and growth.

Another difference in the two samples is in the degree of personalization. In the first sample, the repeated use of the word 'you' could be perceived as accusatory or blaming and focusing on the individual. In the second sample, the use of the term 'the work' or 'the interpretation' shifts the attention to the product versus the individual. This fosters attention to behaviors—things that can be improved or changed—versus the individual who might receive the comments as personal criticism.

Another difference relates to the judgmental quality attached to the work in sample one by the use of terms such as 'good', 'pretty good', or 'decent'. These terms imply a value judgment regarding worth of the work. In some instances, these terms are used without any description of what made the work 'good', 'pretty good', or 'decent'. So, although these terms may provide an immediate sense of satisfaction to the listener—because they offer terms that are familiar or favorable—they are 'empty' because they are not descriptive or informative. Conversely, the use of the terms 'effective' or ' less than effective' focus on the implication of the message and whether it would be understood. These terms are more neutral and foster attention to the end product.

How information was organized in the two samples is yet another difference. The first sample alternately identifies something that didn't work with something that did. This organization makes it more difficult to identify patterns or specific features that are being addressed. The second sample organizes the information into two categories—what worked and what didn't, and isolates specific features. The use of the features provides an overarching label or category for the feedback. Then, examples can be provided illustrating the feature in specific applications. Although this requires more description and explanation, it is more useful to the recipient of the feedback.

For sure, the first sample can be communicated faster and easier. It is always easier to make generalizations that do not require explanation or justification. The question is whether faster and easier is consistent with the goals of feedback. Does it foster collaboration, openness, and reflective processing? Or, does it foster defensiveness and resistance? If it fosters the latter, then it is counter-productive to the intended goal of feedback.

Constructing Useful Feedback Messages

The two examples illustrate that the way messages are conveyed impacts on how the message will be received. The affect, tone, and wording of feedback messages impacts on the listener's perception of meaning and intent. Consider again feedback you have

received from a parent, a teacher, a friend, a co-worker, a stranger, or a supervisor. What do you remember from the messages? Chances are you remember how the feedback was stated, even more than the specifics of the feedback.

Messages that are evaluative, controlling, personalized, non-committal, or strategically motivated make the message difficult to receive. Consider the following examples.

Messages That Make Listening Difficult:

- Evaluative-   "This sentence was signed incorrectly."

- Controlling-   "I think you should make your Fingerspelling more clear"

- Personalized-   "You didn't interpret some of the information. You just left it out."

- Superior-   "Since I have more experience in the Deaf Community, it would be best if I took the lead on this assignment."

- Certain-   "That sign is never used by deaf people." "Deaf people will never accept having a mentee observe during an actual assignment."

- Neutral-   "It doesn't matter. Just do what you want."

- Strategic-   "It would be better if you came to a class I am teaching on Wednesday nights."

Messages that are descriptive, solution-oriented, based on equality, and supportive or open make messages easier to receive and promotes effective listening. Here are some examples.

Messages That Promote Effective Listening:

- Descriptive-   "The work reflects the following combination of signs, 'use + wrong + alcohol', which could mean, ' the wrong alcohol was used', or 'alcohol is being used wrong.' The speaker said, 'alcohol abuse'.

                                "The speaker said, 'the future looks bright'. The interpretation stated, 'future + become + light'.

- Solution Oriented   " One option for enhancing skills in this area is to view a videotape and isolate only the pronoun forms. Review the tape as often as necessary, until you feel comfortable identifying all the pronouns in the text. Then, interpret the

text—only interpreting the pronoun marker. Eventually, when you are comfortable identifying the pronoun marker and who it represents, you can interpret the rest of the information.

- Equality   " What has your experience been related to that sign?

- Supportive/Open   "Interpreting is really difficult. I feel frustrated at times, too."

So, when structuring feedback, striving to be descriptive and specific is important. Even though doing so requires more time and effort, it will be more useful and empowering to the receiver. If the amount of time available for feedback is limited, the number of features addressed could be reduced to ensure that what is addressed is stated in a way that promotes collegiality and learning.

General Tips for Giving Feedback

Here are general tips that provide a framework for approaching the feedback process.

- Feedback is not a demand to change.
- Remember that the process is voluntary—feedback can be accepted or rejected. So, the person providing the feedback can provide data that was observed without trying to convince or persuade the receiver.
- Describe behavior in terms of more or less, effective or ineffective, rather than as good or bad.
- Share ideas rather than give advice. Be resourceful and knowledgeable about what is available for skill development.
- Engage in conversation to explore alternatives and resources rather than always give answers, solutions, or cures.
- Focus on behavior that the receiver can do something about rather than shortcomings over which the receiver has no control. (As an example, focus on the pace and production of fingerspelled items rather than the length or shortness of the individual's fingers.)
- Check in regularly to make sure communication is clear. Asking for observations or what the receiver of the feedback observed is a way to begin.
- Listen for attitudes, beliefs, values and motivations and be aware of our own emotional response to the receiver.
- Give your undivided attention to the receiver. The feedback is for them and the analysis you are offering is to support their growth and development.

Two Additional Principles

There are two other important principles to apply when giving feedback. First, provide feedback that is the result of direct evidence. In other words, discuss what you have seen and observed directly, versus what you have heard others say. The use of indirect or

ricocheted feedback is not useful or empowering. This is a strategy that is sometimes used by feedback givers to transfer 'ownership' of feedback in an effort to avoid confrontation or to mask true feelings. An example of this might be if the feedback giver has an unresolved issue with the person they are providing feedback to, then tries to use the feedback process to address the issue in an indirect manner. Another reason it is done may relate to a lack of confidence on the part of the feedback giver. By assigning their observations to others, they may feel they gain more credibility. This strategy defeats the overarching purpose of feedback and will damage the potential for a collegial relationship.

There is a basic law of communication stating that the more relay stations a message goes through, the more likely it is to be distorted (Hargrove, 1995.) In many situations, therefore, second or third-hand feedback can be worse than none at all. The sender doesn't know if it was observed or described accurately. The receiver, realizing that the information is probably distorted, either regards it as suspicious or doesn't bother to act on it at all.

Here is an example of 'ricocheted' feedback.

" The effectiveness of fingerspelling to convey technical terms was inconsistent. Sometimes the fingerspelling was paired with signs that provided a context for the spelled item, other times it was not. This is consistent with what I have heard Marcia and Sherry say about your work."

Or…

"I saw something in your work today that I have heard Marcia and Sherry talk about before with you. It was the addition of a 'nose wrinkle' each time you fingerspell."

A second principle relates to providing feedback as immediately as possible. " Feedback is like oatmeal—it doesn't go down as well when it's cold. To be effective, feedback should be given as soon after the event or observation as possible." (Stewart, 1996.) The use of videotape provides a common reference point for reconnecting with the 'event' being discussed, and could provide an alternative to immediate feedback. However, even with the use of videotape, the feedback should occur within a reasonable timeframe if it is to be useful and empowering as a tool for continued growth and development.

So, when providing feedback focusing on direct observation and timing are two important factors to consider.

Conclusion

Effective feedback is an invitation to communicate about observations related to a specific event. It is provided in a spirit of collegiality with the goal of being useful and empowering to the receiver of the feedback. It is an opportunity for both the giver and receiver of the feedback to engage in reflective discussion for the purpose of creating

growth and personal development. It is marked by focused observation that is descriptive and specific, and offers insight into both what was done effectively and what was done that was less than effective. When feedback is provided in a timely manner and with a genuine intent to foster collegial exchange, the results can be a powerful tool to advance the profession.

References

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