Partnerships: Promoting Practise to Practice
Corene Kennedy, M.Ed., COI
George Brown College, Toronto, Ontario

Introduction

As experiential learning is integral to developing capabilities, and because observing others in action does not ensure competent interpreters, this assignment focussed on how four American Sign Language (ASL) English interpreter graduates describe their experiential learning through program partnerships in relation to their current interpreting practice.

Partnership opportunities between institutions of higher learning and community organizations provide field-specific experiential learning within authentic contexts. These experiences serve both as a summative learning opportunity to support praxis, and as a stepping-stone towards professional practice and can be found in Nursing, Social Work, Business and Public Relations programs to name but a few.

Partnerships differ from community volunteerism (cultural and language experiences), service learning (addressing community needs) and practicum (master/apprentice model of learning) opportunities.

Partnerships support:

- Contextual learning situations to create linkages between course content and practice bridging community and classrooms
- Opportunities for students to tackle real-life problems with real people
- Experiential learning that is distinguished from classroom learning in that scholarship is offered within site-based, situated learning contexts
- Students to be wholly accountable for service provision

Methodology

- Limited qualitative research assignment utilizing an interpretivist/constructivist theoretical perspective
- Purposeful sampling selection of four novice (less than 3 years of professional service provision) Canadian ASL English interpreter graduates
- Graduates contacted via email invitation through a national professional interpreting association, online directory of ASL English interpreters
- Individual semi-structured, open-ended interviews analyzed using the constant comparative method of data analysis.
- The interviews consisted of 12 questions and ranged between 27 to 57 minutes.

Limitations:

- Small sample size limited the ability to include a greater variety of views
- Not able to triangulate the data due to time constraints, therefore the corpus may not be generalizable across the population of all novice ASL English interpreters

Results

Analysis of the findings highlighted three main themes -

Learning Contexts

- Artificial contexts (labs, role-plays, videos). No opportunity to take full responsibility for the work
- Quasi-authentic context (practicums, simulations). Practicums deemed as 'quasi', or limited in scope, in terms of responsibilities and actual service provision by participants
- Authentic contexts (site-based situated settings). Partnerships provided real-life experience as students were completely responsible for service provision

Stepping-stone

- Important to test the waters and answerable for the work prior to graduation/allowed students to 'flex their wings' and develop confidence
- Working with others. Acting as professional interpreters during the partnerships enabled development of professional interpersonal skills
- Building capacity. Skill-sets developed and honed through the partnerships and relied upon as a professional. Participants indicated partnerships as a vital piece to their learning and development and should be part of interpreting curricula

Practise to Practice

- Reflect on recursive practise during partnerships to support participants' professional practice
- Working with colleagues to develop a rapport - familiar due to the practise obtained during the partnerships
- Partnership preparation and organizational skills transferred to professional practice
- Taking the bull by the horns during the partnerships fosters confidence in approaching current assignment demands
- Similarity of the 'unknowns' in both the practise opportunities and professional work - feel more prepared to handle variables due to partnership schema

Findings suggest that interpreting with real interlocutors whereby students were wholly accountable for the work, experiencing 'ownership' of service provision served to enhance their confidence, readiness, and experiential base with which to draw upon as professionals.

Conclusion

Empirical research has shown that when students engage in partnerships -

- They witness how program content can scaffold praxis
- They acquire a sense of accountability and decision-making responsibility
- Evaluation of theoretical/construct understanding and conscious examination of experiences occurs
- Reflective practice, consideration of post-opportunity actions, and project future considerations of their work
- Experiences are reflected upon in professional practice

Considerations for programs -

Challenges

- Agency institutional tensions and poor planning
- Students' inadequate participation and effort
- Time, volume of work, increased responsibilities for students
- Unpredictability of situated learning can cause anxiety or discomfort for students though feelings were short-lived and led to the students' intellectual and personal growth
- Focus on partnership structure and current student learning outcomes rather than on implications for graduates' professional practice

Benefits

- Partnerships develop a qualified and experienced graduate body
- Graduate perceptions - received better training than their colleagues
- Win-win for the participating institutions, organizations, and students
- Students see successful use of curricular knowledge in a community setting fostering motivation and retention of materials
- Integration of praxis, learner reflection, and critical thinking skills

Recommendation - research to incorporate the retrospective of a larger sample, from a variety of AEIP/ITP program alumni.