

NEW PARADIGMS FOR THE INTERPRETED CLASSROOM

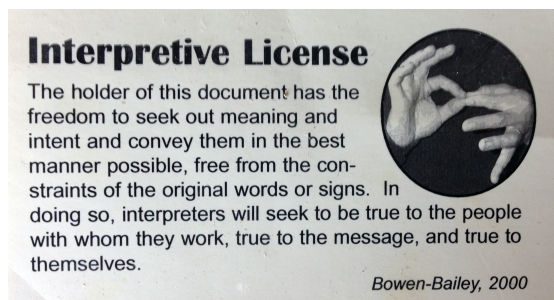
(written for the RID *VIEWS* – in press, August 2014)

By Doug Bowen-Bailey, CI & CT

I started my career in 1992 as an interpreter in an Alaskan middle school. I was fresh out of an interpreter education program with the latest information about the field. On my very first day however, my brazen overconfidence led to me to interpret in a way that may have inflicted emotional harm on a student.

The setting was a gym class and the first day in a new middle school for a deaf student. She had come from an integrated classroom at the elementary level that included hearing students who learned ASL and Deaf culture. This former environment created a comfortable social setting for deaf students with rich language exposure, a far cry from a gym class with a group of non-signing hearing students she had never met and a new interpreter – who, on top of it all, was a man. The teacher started the class with a roll call, quickly reading the students' names from roster. I made the decision to fingerspell the names. When the teacher called out the name of the deaf student, I simply fingerspelled her name like all the rest. However, the student didn't respond when her name was fingerspelled, creating the impression that she didn't even know her own name. I felt that her non-response was an indication that she needed to reduce her dependence on the support she received in elementary school. I also felt that the RID Code of Ethics supported my approach as a use of the conduit model. Today, as a more experienced interpreter looking back on this situation, I cringe when I think of the emotional harm that my decision may have caused a student on her very first day of middle school.

As my career evolved, I began to see how my decision might have been justified by my understanding of ethics at the time but, without question, my method was flawed. One response to my growing understanding of decision making was that in 2000, I developed a card I labeled an "interpretive license." I began to share this "license" with educational interpreters in workshops and mentoring sessions to address the tendency to rigidly follow the Code of Ethics. The license read:



The holder of this document has the freedom to seek out meaning and intent and convey them in the best manner possible, free from the constraints of the original words or signs. In doing so, interpreters will seek to be true to the people with whom they work, true to the message, and true to themselves.

I found that interpreters often guarded themselves against an imagined "interpreter police" who would arrest them for violations of the Code of Ethics. As a result, interpreters frequently were not "true to the people, the message or themselves" because they felt that it meant they would not be following the RID Code of Ethics.

Interpreters in classrooms (including myself) have been known to use phrases such as the following:

- "I can't do that because of my Code of Ethics."
- "I don't want to set a precedent that another interpreter won't be able to follow or might think is unethical."
- "I feel like I should do this, but I know the Code of Ethics says I shouldn't."

At that early point in my career, I had suspicions that such a strict allegiance to the RID Code of Ethics was not an effective approach. The "interpretive license" was an intuitive reaction to express that sense, but it wasn't until much later that I learned how to explain why and to articulate a framework for a different approach. I now believe that part of my fear in diverging from rigid adherence to a written code was that

the alternative was “ethical relativism” that is, anything goes. Thankfully, a number of scholars have provided frameworks that allow for ethical decision-making to be more flexible in the classroom.

Robyn Dean and Robert Pollard, in the introduction of their demand control schema (DC-S), established the foundation of the new paradigm. While there is much more to the DC-S than I can share here, I want to highlight three significant parts in my own experience.

First, Dean and Pollard explained the difference between ethics that focus on the *actions* of interpreters and ethics that focus on the *consequences* of those actions for the people involved. The question of the old paradigm was “What did the interpreter do?” The emerging paradigm asks instead “How does the interpreter’s actions affect those involved?” The new question leads us to consider and implement very different approaches.

Second, the DC-S provided a framework for understanding the context in which these decisions need to be made. Dean and Pollard identified that interpreters need to analyze the environmental, interpersonal, paralinguistic, and intrapersonal aspects of any situation and recognize both the main demand and any concurrent ones that contribute to situations that need to be addressed.

In addition to a focus on the context and consequences, Dean and Pollard borrowed a framework of ethics and decision-making models from other practice professions. Actions can be evaluated on a continuum from conservative to liberal. Simply put, conservative means taking less action and liberal means doing more. The continuum suggests that different situations call for different approaches. The goal is not to always be in the middle, but to be able to determine when a more liberal or more conservative approach leads to the best results.

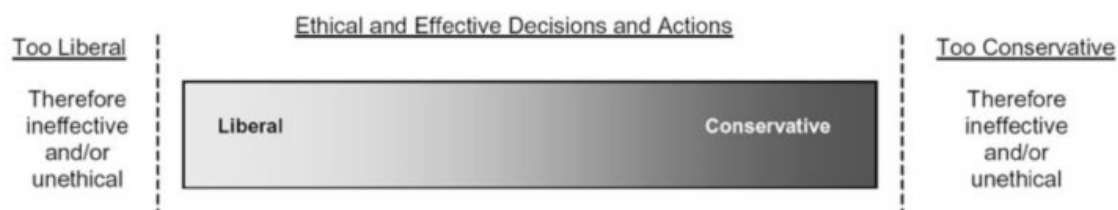


Figure 1. Continuum of Ethical Reasoning (Dean and Pollard, 2005) From Oxford University Press, Permission Pending

Anna Witter-Merithew (2012) echoes Dean and Pollard when she points out that interpreters are often more apt to see overly liberal actions as unethical. As professionals, our “errors of omission”, those times that we have been too conservative in our actions, are harder for us to see. I suggest that this is because conservative approaches were the norm when our profession had a more rigid understanding of the Code of Ethics.

Witter-Merithew et al’s (2010) exploration of the concept of *relational autonomy* helped me to further understand the emerging paradigm. While there is much in their article worth exploring, I want to highlight the point that our autonomy (i.e., our power to take actions as interpreters), comes in part from our relationship to the system in which we work. This suggests that we must have the professional maturity to understand how we fit into the larger system in which we are placed. For those of us who work in educational settings, we are not simply interpreters with allegiance to the NAD/RID Code of Professional Conduct. We also function as employees who must be accountable to the mission of our school, legal mandates that protect children, and other social structures that influence our work. Using this type of “system thinking” can help interpreters make decisions that are more fitting for the contexts in which they work.

Witter-Merithew et al (2010) also explain that an analysis of autonomy of participants can assist in

determining where to land on the continuum of ethical decision-making.

Ideally, the more balanced the autonomy expressed by participants, the more likely the interpreter is to exercise conservative choices in her decision latitude. Conversely, the less balanced the autonomy expressed by participants, particularly by Deaf consumers, the more likely the interpreter is to exercise liberal choices in her decision latitude (p.53).

Connecting the concept of relational autonomy with the ethical decision-making continuum was a light bulb moment for me. I realized that in many of my classrooms settings, deaf or hard of hearing students have relatively low autonomy. Certainly the deaf student in the gym class on the first day of middle school was in a position of low autonomy. Yet I chose the most conservative approach in my interpretation because I felt that was the most ethical (as supported by my understanding of the Code of Ethics at the time.) Looking back, I now see that a more liberal approach – even just using her name sign – would have made the message more clear and been more effective.

A third influence in my current understanding comes from Peter Llewellyn-Jones and Robert Lee's (2011, 2013, 2014) concept of "role-space."

Drawing heavily on the field of sociology, they suggest that there are three dimensions of interpreted interactions, which can be represented by axes on a graph (See Figure 2).

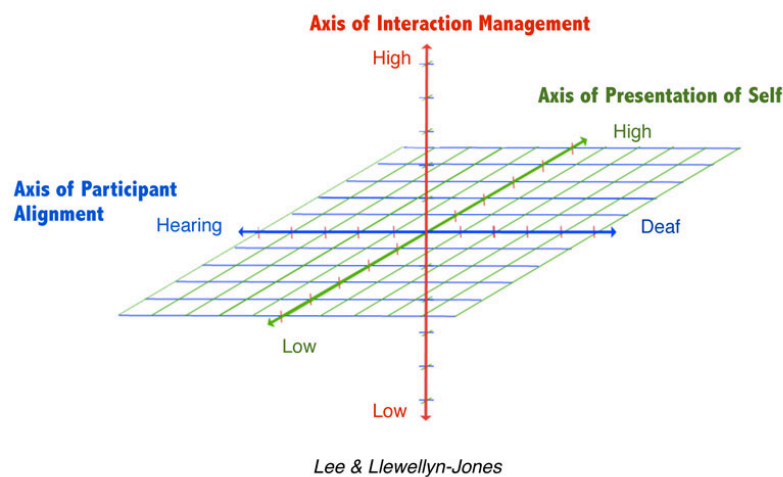
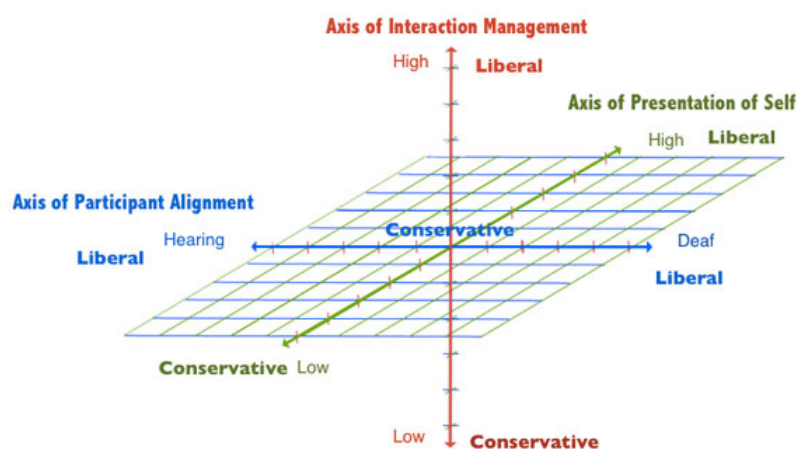


Figure 2: The Dimensions of Role Space (Graphic by Bowen-Bailey)

In this model, the first dimension of role space is *interaction management*, which describes how much control interpreters exert over the flow of

communication. Strict simultaneous interpretation with no interruptions represents very low interaction management. On the other end of that axis, consecutive interpretation, with frequent clarifications, represents a high interaction management. A second dimension is *presentation of self*, which means how much the interpreter is an "actor" in the conversation. With low presentation, interpreters simply convey the statements of others. With a high presentation of self, interpreters author and share our own ideas. For example, when I introduce myself and share ideas about what the best seating arrangements for an interpreting situation might be, I am exhibiting a higher presentation of self. The third dimension is *alignment with participants*, which means how much interpreters speak or relate directly with the deaf and hearing people in the room. Having a conversation with a deaf student on Monday about what she did over the weekend is an example of higher alignment with the deaf person. Reading a book when not interpreting to avoid direct conversation is an example of low alignment.

Coming from a sociological lens, this model of interpreting provides ways to think about and explain our actions as interpreters. It does not, however, replace the need for ethical standards such as a code of professional conduct. Dean and Pollard (2013) point out that even in ethics focused on the consequences of actions, codes of ethics and conduct are important expressions of professional values. While the CPC may not tell interpreters what to do in specific contexts, it does express values that are important parts of evaluating potential consequences.



In the classroom, interpreters can use the insights of the demand control schema and relational autonomy to help determine how best to express our professional values. The axes of role-space can be useful in explaining our choices. In my work with other interpreters, I frequently use an overlay of the conservative – liberal continuum on the role-space axes (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Role-Space Merged with Ethical Reasoning Continuum

(Concepts from Lee/Llewellyn-Jones and Dean/Pollard; Graphic by Bowen-Bailey)

Using a convergence of these paradigms, more liberal approaches lead to a more expansive role-space, while more conservative choices create a smaller role-space.

Here are two examples to demonstrate how this combined framework can help interpreters to both make decisions and to explain them. When I was in Alaska, a deaf pre-school student was enrolled at a neighboring elementary school. He was recently adopted from Russia and had very little language. During my prep hours, I was asked to help him develop a language base. I did some interpreting between him and a pre-school teacher, but most of my time was spent directly interacting with him. I told him stories in ASL – both from my own imagination and from picture books. Under the old framework, I would have said I was working more as a “language facilitator” than as an interpreter. Using my newer understandings, I am less concerned with the label. Instead, I would now describe my actions as using more liberal controls in order to meet the goals of the school and parents in fostering the student’s social and linguistic development. This means I had a high presentation of self (being that I was generating a lot of the content of the communication), exerted a high level of control over the interactions (frequently being the one to pull the pre-school teacher into the conversation), and had a high alignment with the deaf student. This liberal approach is supported by the understanding that the student had a very low relative autonomy because he brought limited language skills into the situation. A more conservative approach in which I solely interpreted the communications of other people may have resulted in a loss of opportunities for the student to develop language during a critical language acquisition period.

Contrast that scenario to another time when I was working with a deaf kindergarten student who had a much higher sense of personal and linguistic autonomy. This student had grown up in a signing environment and was already a natural storyteller when I met him as a four-year old. During free play, he often organized imaginative play – directing hearing students as to what roles they would have. In this situation, I chose a much more restricted role space. I had limited direct communication with the students so my alignment was more neutral. Frequently, when I did speak to a student, it was to explain to one of the hearing kids how interpreting works. I also had a low presentation of self, choosing to allow the students to focus on interacting with each other, rather than the fact that some guy with a beard was also in their midst.

The framework that I now operate from, drawn from my understandings of the demand control schema and relational autonomy, allows me to explain the rationale behind the different approaches. They may result in different role-spaces because of the different demands present in the situation, yet they both are expressions of the professional values of fostering autonomy and educational development.

As I share my perspectives around the country, interpreters often respond with a sense of relief. Many are still working within the confines of the old paradigm of a rule-based ethics. They sense that the rigidity doesn't work, but don't have the language to express how or why. This new paradigm allows us to explain our choices as interpreters that support the best results for the people we serve. As interpreters understand and use this new framework, my greatest hope is that no deaf student will again experience similar harm to what I inflicted in a middle school gym class so long ago.

Acknowledgements

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