

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 comr8p0 d49(p)Tj12 0 0 12u

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 BDC porm

Effective feedbackofoe uicsnll hproduTjns evidenc005 Tc -0.3008 Tw 12 0 0 1330.6.0003 370.09

## **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 ro

## **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.)

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 term

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

Bruffee, K. March/April 1987. *The Art of Collaborative Learning*. Change.

Cokely, D., Witter-Merithew, A., and Neumann Solow, S. 1995. "Principles for Providing Feedback and Discussing the Work" from *Diagnostician Preparation Training Manual*, Advancement Seminars, Charlotte, N.C.

Hargrove, R. 1995. "Guiding Ideas for Giving Feedback" from *Masterful Coaching*, San Diego, CA: Pfeiffer and Company.

Porter, L. 1982. "Giving and Receiving Feedback: It Will Never Be Easy, But It Can Be Better", *NTL Reading Book for Human Relations Training*, New England Regional Leadership Program, Center for Rural Studies.

Slavin, R. E. April 1988. *Cooperative Learning and Individualized Instruction*. The Education Digest.

Stewart, D. 1996. "Feedback is Free" from *The Power of People Skills*. NYC, NY: John Wiley and Sons Publishers.