Interpreters for interpreters: My experience of reflective practice training

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**1. Background**

I would like to talk about my training to be a facilitator for running reflective practice support groups. For me, one of the most important things about this was that this is something that interpreters can do for the benefit of other interpreters.

I have been working as a freelance interpreter for over three decades altogether, and for the last twenty-odd years I have been based in the North-East of Scotland. My journey to reflective practice started through my work in Aberdeen City and Shire for the Interpreting Service within the Grampian Regional Equality Council, known as GREC for short.

The idea behind the Reflective Support Group was born back in February 2020, when a group of GREC interpreters got together for a conversation to explore the challenges and mental health issues that public service interpreters may experience in their assignments. Interpreters in the group brought up various issues. These included feelings of isolation, burnout, lack of security, and secondary trauma related to their assignments, in particular in the medical context.

Since then, the Covid pandemic, the refugee crisis and other factors have increased the number of appointments relating to mental health, as well as the need to look after the interpreters’ own mental health in order to prevent secondary trauma. The idea was born to create a reflective practice support group, and after some research the GREC interpreting service came across Beverley Costa’s name, her projects and publications.

All this led to the idea of an apprenticeship programme, aimed at training a group of interpreters as facilitators who would then subsequently run reflective practice sessions for other interpreters. Initially eight candidates were selected for participating in the apprenticeship programme, and I was one of them.

Before we started the first two sessions in January 2022, there had been various discussions and preparations as to when we would start, and what it would involve, as none of us knew what to expect. Beverley led us through the whole process from the very beginning, and the first tip she gave us was to start with an open mind.

I think it would be fair to say that none of us had very much idea of what was in front of us. During the first two days of that icy January weekend we were introduced to the apprenticeship model for facilitating reflective and supportive supervision. The sessions covered the purposes of reflective practice, intelligent empathy, how to receive and give feedback, and much more. We observed, listened, shared, deconstructed and reconstructed reflective practice facilitation.

For me, many things finally began to fall into place. My many years of working as a public service interpreter had involved going through sometimes very traumatic interpreting assignments, exacerbated by constantly having to speak in the first person. I had repeatedly tried to find answers as to how to cope, while finding no exit to my emotional fatigue, as everything we experience as an interpreter is confidential.

In the past, I had attended meetings with various interpreter groups. Through talking to other interpreters I had realised that many of them, too, had been asking themselves the same questions as me: What can be done and why am I paradoxically feeling no better after discussion meetings with other interpreters?

Many interpreters, in fact, had begun to avoid attending meetings, because it felt as though we were going round and round the same issues without finding any answers, so we just felt stuck. We would discuss issues, often getting annoyed with some people talking for too long, sometimes meetings would overrun, no solutions were to be found, and people ended up feeling even more upset than before. And that was something that struck me during that weekend in January. It seems obvious to me now, but at that point I realised what had been going wrong before. We learned about facilitating reflective practice, that it has sequence and structure, and the group must have a working agreement.

**2. The working agreement**

Reflective Practice is a completely new concept for most interpreters. The issue of the challenges faced by interpreters does not seem to be something that is widely discussed, at least in Scotland; and there is certainly no local support available to them. Discovering what Reflective Practice is, was one of the first things that we learned. It is not a therapy, but it is not just a social chat either, where people can say anything they want, sometimes leaving others hurt. Everyone has to agree to the ground rules. And, as a facilitator, you need to make sure that the participants realise that when you accept the ground rules you also accept your own responsibility towards yourself and each other.

We learned that responsibility lies not only in what you say but also in other ways, too. In fairness to each other, you need to respect time boundaries. If you speak for too long there may not be time for others to express their thoughts. Everyone also needs to realise the limitations of the reflective practice. For example, if the sharer thinks their issue may become too overwhelming, they need to think about whether this is a good place for sharing that particular issue, or, they might want to think about talking to a therapist or a counsellor about it.

**3. Time boundaries**

From my previous experiences of participating in interpreters’ groups, I had inherited the feeling that it is impossible to control how long people speak for. Beverley repeatedly stressed how important it is to keep to time and how to deal with this issue. She provided a number of tips on finding solutions to prevent things getting out of control. Again, this has to form part of the working agreement — when, as a facilitator, you ask the participants to be mindful of the time and it is your job to set the time boundaries very clearly.

**4. Other issues**

Perhaps I can mention one or two other things that stood out for me from the course:

As a facilitator, I will be responsible for making sure that the session is a place of safety. In order to feel safe, the participants have to respect each other and remember that people have different opinions. I realised that mutual trust, respect and being non-judgemental are the building blocks of that safe space. These things had sometimes been lacking in our previous meetings, and some participants might have been left with a sense of disappointment. Part of this trust is confidentiality, and one of the ground rules is: “What’s said here, stays here.”

We were given homework to do. The homework that we did in pairs after the January sessions gave us the opportunity to experience what it felt like to be a listener, and what it felt like to be a sharer. In our March session we practised, step by step, how to be a group facilitator.

After day 3 of the training, between March and the end of June, we had further sessions as group facilitators, just for the participants of the course, which we decided to do in pairs (two facilitators for each session). This was a really good opportunity for each of us to practise as facilitators. We also discovered that we could discuss other issues as interpreters, not only something traumatic, and we discussed ways forward for other tricky situations. We had a good laugh together as well.

Each practice session was followed by a feedback session with Beverley.

These sessions provided an opportunity to exchange insights honestly about how we had done as facilitators and to hear from the rest of the participants in the group.

Another thing that stood out for me personally was that as a facilitator, you have to be genuine and you are building a *collaborative* relationship. The training taught us how to communicate that

and was good for improving our communication skills. We come from different cultures, we all have different personalities, and some of us are used to expressing ourselves in a very direct manner. When giving feedback, for example, you have to own it, which also makes you sound less categorical. For example, saying “I can see how upset you are”, or “I felt it was upsetting for you to talk about it” is better feedback than just remarking "You’re very upset!”

As a group, we had many, many questions about how to plan for contingencies:

What if no-one wants to bring anything up, what if too many people want to share, or what if you’re running out of time? Of course, it is not possible to foresee all scenarios. But, it is important to be aware what kinds of contingencies there can be. The three practice sessions that I mentioned earlier, when we had a chance to be facilitators, allowed us to see that unexpected things can happen even in a small group of people, when you are not expecting anything challenging to be happening at all.

**5. The importance of the interpreter-facilitator**

Another point I want to make is why I think that it is interpreters who should run reflective practice support groups for other interpreters:

There is no such thing as a miracle, and difficulties are a part of public service interpreting. It is not only the traumatic assignments that can leave you wounded. Sometimes you simply feel there is no appreciation for the difficult task you have done. As interpreters, we interact with various services. Some of them have little understanding of how to work with interpreters. Also, services usually have their own support systems. We have none, and quite often I have been left with the feeling that I do not belong anywhere. Your fellow interpreter knows best where you are coming from and can relate to you. We as interpreters have collected so many difficult memories over the years, with no support available to us, and finally we have the opportunity to talk and support each other on a structured basis. My training to be an interpreter-facilitator has taught me how to do this.

The reflective practice may provide the support an interpreter needs, and you will have played a positive role in it as the facilitator.

For example:

- the session may have helped you let go of a difficult memory - even a tiny bit;

- you may have been able to share your experience with people who understand you in a safe environment (as far as confidentiality allows you to, of course);

- someone in a group may have given you a tip for a future assignment which you would not have known how to handle otherwise.

Above all, everyone knows they are not there to be judged but to support each other. There is a facilitator (or maybe two) who is responsible for making sure that the session is a safe place for everyone, and that everyone plays a part in this responsibility. It is a privileged position for you as the facilitator to provide a safe space for reflection and continuous learning, and this will effectively make our work better.

The training was very clearly structured, and from having “no idea at all”, together with my colleagues, I was able to discover step by step that we can do this!

**6. What next?**

I am looking forward to starting in my role as an interpreter-facilitator. And this brings us all to a new question: what next? We finished our training in June, and the plan for the five of us who have completed the training is to start running reflective practice groups for our fellow interpreters. There are over 100 freelance interpreters working for GREC in 50 different languages*.* We have not experienced any “real” sessions yet as we only finished the course at the end of June but, even so, I can say that I have already experienced some benefits. Apart from the fact that I feel that I am now able to be an interpreter-facilitator, I think I am a better listener and a better communicator than I was before. Recently I have been involved in interpreting for Ukrainian refugees. We have large numbers of refugees in Aberdeen and interpreters have been working long hours. Sometimes people just want you to listen. You hear all sorts of upsetting stories, and the scale of the crisis shocks you. As an interpreter, you just have to carry on and do a good job. What I learned about intelligent empathy as a future facilitator has helped me stay focused as an interpreter.

Perhaps I can give you another recent example. I was interpreting at a q&a session in front of a large group of people. The session went out of control, an argument started, and instead of finding out any useful information people were fighting. I was surprised when I caught myself thinking: I know why it’s happening! The speaker never introduced any ground rules! There weren’t any time limits set either, and the session wasn’t effective. I hope this is not going to happen in my own reflective practice sessions!

**7. And finally…**

Perhaps you would allow me to finish with a few words of thanks. Thank you first and foremost to Beverley for the brilliant course, which we all absolutely enjoyed. Thank you to my fellow interpreters in the apprenticeship group who stayed committed to it all. Thank you to GREC who recognised their duty of care and organised — and financed — the apprenticeships, and thank you, Rosie, Interpreting Service coordinator, for putting your heart and soul into this project.