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Sarah Wheeler: Engage, Practice, Learn

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Sarah Wheeler: Engage, Practice, Learn

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Abstract

This article is part of a project which aims to recognize and honor leaders in the interpreting and interpreter education fields. I chose to recognize interpreter and teacher Sarah Wheeler. Although she is not directly in my community, her actions have played a direct role leading myself and many other student interpreters. She serves numerous interpreting and Deaf communities in the U.S. both in person and online. She believes we should continue educating ourselves and improve our skills through deliberate practice. Not only does she encourage others to do this, but she also leads by example. Although busy with her own life, she still actively practices, studies, and encourages other interpreters to do the same with a positive growth mindset.

Sarah Wheeler's journey into the interpreting world started as a young child. She grew up with Deaf parents and was immersed in Deaf Culture and its history. This experience gave her a unique perspective where she could see both the Deaf world and the hearing world around her. These experiences would form who she is as an individual, guide her educational and career

choices, and embark her on a journey to inspire other interpreters to bridge the gap between these two worlds to gain true understanding for seamless communication access.

These building blocks into Sarah's future all stemmed from her experiences between the Deaf and hearing worlds growing up. She was privy to seeing a multitude of interpreters interpret for her parents. She witnessed interpreters with a wide range of skills who were able to make communication seamless for her parents and those who seemed to create more roadblocks for them. Observing different interpreters who worked with her parents, Sarah said that those who struggled to provide seamless communication were interpreters whose skills "weren't where they could have been with their language, interpreting skills, or social skills". Observing these interpreters gave Sarah a lot to reflect on. How were they impacting her parents? Why was it happening? What could they do to improve those skills? These are all ideas which would begin to percolate as time went on and would eventually help establish her own values as an interpreter, teacher, human being, and influence how she views the world around her.

Sarah continued to pay attention to the interactions of the world around her as she grew up. She served six years in the Air Force, earned a B.A. in Business Management from Duke Continuing Studies, and an M.Ed. in Interpreter Pedagogy from NorthEastern University. She has been working as a freelance ASL/English interpreter since 2007. All of these experiences and her work as an interpreter have influenced numerous aspects of her life and how she "shows up in other spaces of her life". When asked what she meant by this statement she expanded:

I believe the more I get involved with and the more I learn I am able to apply not only to the extra-linguistic knowledge portions of the job, but also to the ways that I am showing up to the job and understanding the human interactions of the interpreting process. This has made a big difference for me in terms of decision making and recognizing and managing the emotions that I bring to an interaction.

Ideas about herself and how other interpreters need to get involved, understand human interactions, recognize their emotions, and how to make decisions all kept coming back up throughout our interview process. Getting ‘involved’ in one way or another is key for interpretation success. According to Sarah getting involved ensures that she is ready for the interpreting assignments that may come her way. Getting involved could mean having the knowledge about the assignment and its terminology already, but it can also mean finding a way to gain information about it so one can become ready to take it on to the best of her ability. This could mean physically getting involved and experiencing the topic first hand, reaching out to colleagues for their experiences with it, or even just reading about it. Another thing that Sarah suggests we get involved with is ourselves. She emphasized that we should know our emotions and be able to recognize them well enough to know how to make decisions based on the interpreter situation at hand and not our gut reaction. Sarah recalled how her emotions impacted her jobs early on:

When I was younger, I was still unsure of myself and how to recognize and label my emotions, so that, sometimes I would make decisions based on the emotion that I was feeling and not the most well thought out decision for everyone there based on the facts.

Sarah emphasized that she practices decision making, identifying her and others' emotional states, and takes part in supervision groups to help her become more deliberate about her growth as an interpreter and interpreter educator. This concept of deliberate practice kept resurfacing during our interview. This concept was first taught to me by her when she was my professor and mentor. She taught us how to use deliberate practice to improve our skills. This type of practice is as it sounds: you choose a specific skill to focus your practice on, build up that skill, and then move on to the next one. Sarah says that if you are struggling with your emotional states and their impact on decisions or just want to improve your skills, then deliberate practice will help.

Practicing decision making, identifying my own and others' emotional states, and taking part in supervision groups have helped me become more deliberate about my growth as an interpreter as well as an interpreter educator.

Supervision groups are another thing that Sarah encourages others to partake in. She says that they were a tremendous asset to her career and that being a part of a group that meets to discuss the demands or conflicts that come up helps interpreters think about how they make decisions differently. Each member of the group can share their perspective and give the interpreter different points of view to incorporate while interpreting. Sarah states that participating in supervision groups has made her a much better interpreter.

Sarah has also hosted her own online mentoring services where she offers her insights into utilizing deliberate practice. Although she is the mentor of this group, she also participates because she believes we can all learn from each other. I had the opportunity to be in a few of her mentoring groups and the debriefs that we did together as a group are as beneficial as supervision meetings. She creates a safe, judgement free environment where we all learned, built connections within our community, and felt equal. Her mentoring style now incorporates Goleman's emotional intelligence to help herself and her mentees identify the emotions and behaviors which may be helping or hindering their interpretations. Once we are aware of our feelings, we can use them to motivate us to succeed. Within her mentoring groups she encourages trust and respect which helps bond interpreters.

The connections we make within the interpreting community are great, but like many others, Sarah encourages interpreters to expand outside of the interpreter community to include the Deaf community as well. Sarah emphasized that being engaged with the Deaf Community is vital to

the success of an interpreter. Thinking back to her childhood and the interpreters who struggled interpreting for her parents compared to those who did not, she can clearly identify those who were actively engaged with the Deaf community versus those who were not. She emphasizes that we can learn how to improve our interpretations by paying attention to the consumers' experience. We should strive to make consumers feel so connected that they forget an interpreter is involved, but how can we do this? Sarah states that we need to get out into the Deaf community to experience the culture and stories outside of the interpreting lens so we can understand how we, as interpreters, impact consumers.

If we individually want to improve our work, the most important place to go to understand what is needed for us to be better at what we do, is to get involved with the multilingual and multicultural Deaf community, the multilingual and multicultural hearing communities, professional communities, etc. that use our services. To be a part of it, and to understand the impact that our actions while interpreting have in the lives of people who use our services.

Interpreting is a difficult task and although perfection is something we strive for, mistakes do happen. Sarah states that if an interpretation did not go well, we must use that experience as an opportunity for growth and improvement. We can look back at the experience, out of the interpreter lens, and assess what occurred so we can work to improve ourselves for next time. We cannot change the things we have no control over, but through our assessment we can see what things were in our control and how we can approach the situation the next time around. Sarah wants us to learn from our mistakes and be willing to share not only our interpreting success stories, but to also be vulnerable enough to share times when we could have done better because those are the moments other professionals can learn from.

Sarah is not one of those teachers who just teaches interpreting. She does not tell her students to venture into the Deaf Community and sit at home. She doesn't just mentor others about

LeGal: Sarah Wheeler

interpreting or tell them how to improve themselves. She lives it. She works as an interpreter experiencing new jobs each day, lives in the Deaf community, debriefs in supervisions with mentors, and is constantly working to improve her own personal development and education. According to Sarah, this field requires more than just knowledge of ASL, Deaf Culture, and Interpreting Processes. “It requires interpreters to have emotional intelligence, multicultural competence, and to interact with the Deaf community.”

There is so much to be learned out there, and I am always encountering new ideas, classes, workshops that help me grow as an individual and as a professional. I know that I am never at the place where I have 'arrived' and that there is always work to be done to improve or become better with the work we do.

Although Sarah is not exactly sure how she will impact the community, she hopes it will be a positive one which leaves the field better than when she started working in it and that the interpreting experience will be a better one for both Deaf and hearing consumers for years to come. In 5-10 years, she hopes to focus more on community development for the d/Deaf community including d/Deaf children and their parents, children of Deaf adults, and interpreters around the topic of emotional intelligence. Sarah’s work ethic as an interpreter and student continues today as she works, attends conferences, hosts workshops, and works on her Ph.D. in General Psychology from Grand Canyon University with an emphasis in Instruction and Cognition with a dissertation focusing on emotional intelligence and the interpreting field. All of Sarah’s insights, experiences, and her ability to share them with her colleagues, students, and mentees make her a phenomenal leader in our field. When asked about how she will ensure that she grows as a leader she responded stating:

Leadership doesn't rest with one person knowing everything. We all have the ability to lead as well as follow. What is key is that we all recognize this within ourselves and know we all have value and expertise that we can share, as well as value and expertise to learn from others. Once this is recognized, then we each can take the

initiative to do our own hard work and growth, which then has an even bigger impact on the field.

Sarah leads by example “setting the bar” at the level of professionalism where she envisions the field heading. She is always working hard to grow and improve as a person and as an interpreter. She knows that creating the change she wants to see begins with changing herself so she strives for improvement and makes sure she puts in the time to develop her skills and knowledge all while inspiring others, like myself, in the field as well.

About the Author

Brittany LeGal works as an educational and VRS interpreter in Clark County, NV. She is originally from Wyoming where she was first introduced to sign language at the Wyoming School for the Deaf. She graduated from Troy University in 2016 with a Bachelor of Science from their Interpreter Training Program. She is currently conducting research on teacher and interpreter relationships and their impact on Deaf education at Western Oregon University’s Master of Arts in their Interpreting Studies Program.

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