Teaching Ethical Standards and Practice within Pre-Service and In-Service Interpreter Education Programs

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The lack of formal coursework in ethical and moral thinking as part of the curricula in many Interpreter Preparation Programs (IPPs) in the United States (Witter-Merithew & Stewart, 1998), along with the fact that the majority of practitioners work in isolation without benefit of supervision or peer collaboration, results in a workforce that is generally under-prepared to make consistent and reliable ethical decisions. The absence of well informed and agreed upon best practices regarding the complex and evolving role of interpreters places both consumers and practitioners at risk (Cokely, 2000, Hoza, 2003). The solution is to empower practitioners with the critical thinking and reflective analysis skills necessary to enhance career and lifelong ethical decision-making processes (Witter-Merithew & Stewart, 1998, Cokely, 2000, Hoza, 2003). This can be achieved through the incorporation of a formal course of study in moral and ethical thinking as a part of IPP curricula, and through In-Service Training Programs (ISTP) offered to working practitioners.

The challenges of role definition and ethical boundaries within the field of Sign Language interpreting, as well as an appreciation for the related paradigm shifts the field has experienced in the United States, can be illuminated by the work of William Graves Perry, Jr., a former psychology professor to graduate students and researcher at Harvard University. During the 1960's, through his work with undergraduate students, Bill Perry researched students' intellectual and ethical development, which formed the basis of his theory. His research culminated in his landmark book, *"Forms of Ethical and Intellectual Development in the College Years"* published in 1970 and most recently republished in 1999.

Perry outlines four distinct stages of intellectual and ethical development that can be built upon to understand ethical development within the field of interpreting: Basic Dualism, Multiplicity, Relativism Subordinate, and Relativism. Belenky, et al (1986), in the text *Women's Ways of Knowing,* provide a feminist orientation to the developmental process, and labeled these states as Received Knowledge, Subjective Knowledge, Procedural Knowledge, and Constructed Knowledge.

Basic Dualism/Received Knowledge
- Learner views the world in polarities
- Dependent on authorities to hand down the truth and teach him/her right from wrong
- Looks to parents, teachers, friends, rules, or colleagues to provide the direction for decision-making
- "Tell me the right answer."

Multiplicity/Subjective Knowledge
- Learner begins to carve out his/her own opinions and thoughts
- Develops personal freedom due to recognition of diversity of opinion and multiple perspectives that exist in society
- Begins to test the beliefs and values 'received' from parents and family
- Acquired beliefs are challenged and begin to cement or reform

Relativism Subordinate/Procedural Knowledge
- Learner begins to develop an analytical and evaluative approach to ethical choices because the teacher insists on evidence and support of opinions
- Begins to ask and answer the question, "Why do I/you believe that?"
- Begins to develop the necessary analytical skills to determine ethical choices based on a rationale supported by evidence and reasoning

Relativism/Constructed Knowledge
- Learner comprehends that "truth" is relative
- Recognizes that meaning depends on the context and the framework the "knower" uses to understand
- Develops the skills to look beyond his or her own "truth" to determine the available ethical choices appropriate for the people involved in a particular setting
- Realizes no "one rule fits all" approach to ethical decision-making
- Learns to take responsibility for the way situations are viewed and interpreted, which leads to a range of informed choices

Anecdotal discourse among practitioners and interpreter educators indicates that many interpreters are still at a state of received knowledge—looking for specific and hard-fast responses to ethical dilemmas (Witter-Merithew and Stewart, 1998). The goal of an IPP or ISTP for interpreter practitioners should be to facilitate the movement through these stages by fostering the development of character and ethical-decision making skills towards the achievement of what Rushworth Kidder (1995) defines as ethical fitness.

> *"Ethical fitness is the capacity to recognize the nature of moral challenges and respond with a well-tuned conscience, a lively perception of the difference between right and wrong, and an ability to choose the right and live by it." (Kidder, p. 57)*

Achieving fitness is a challenging process, involving many steps. These steps can be categorized into the domains of character building; steps that focus on values clarification and self-awareness, and ethical and moral decision-making; steps that focus on the critical reflection and analysis of real-world experiences encountered by working interpreters and consumers. Illustration 1 provides a representation of the blocks of learning the authors view as essential in moving learners towards the achievement of ethical fitness.

Building Blocks of Ethical Fitness

Ongoing reflection & learning

Regular & consistent application of this foundation

Knowledge of & skills related to resolution strategies

Recognition of ethical dilemmas

Knowledge of ethical standards & practice

Critical thinking & reflective analysis skills

Appreciation & understanding of sources & types of conflict

Appreciation & understanding of right vs right and right vs wrong paradigms

Internalization of guiding principles - the 7 habits

Self-awareness and current state of ethical & intellectual maturity

Clarification of Core Values and Beliefs

Ethical Decision-making Blocks

Character Building Blocks

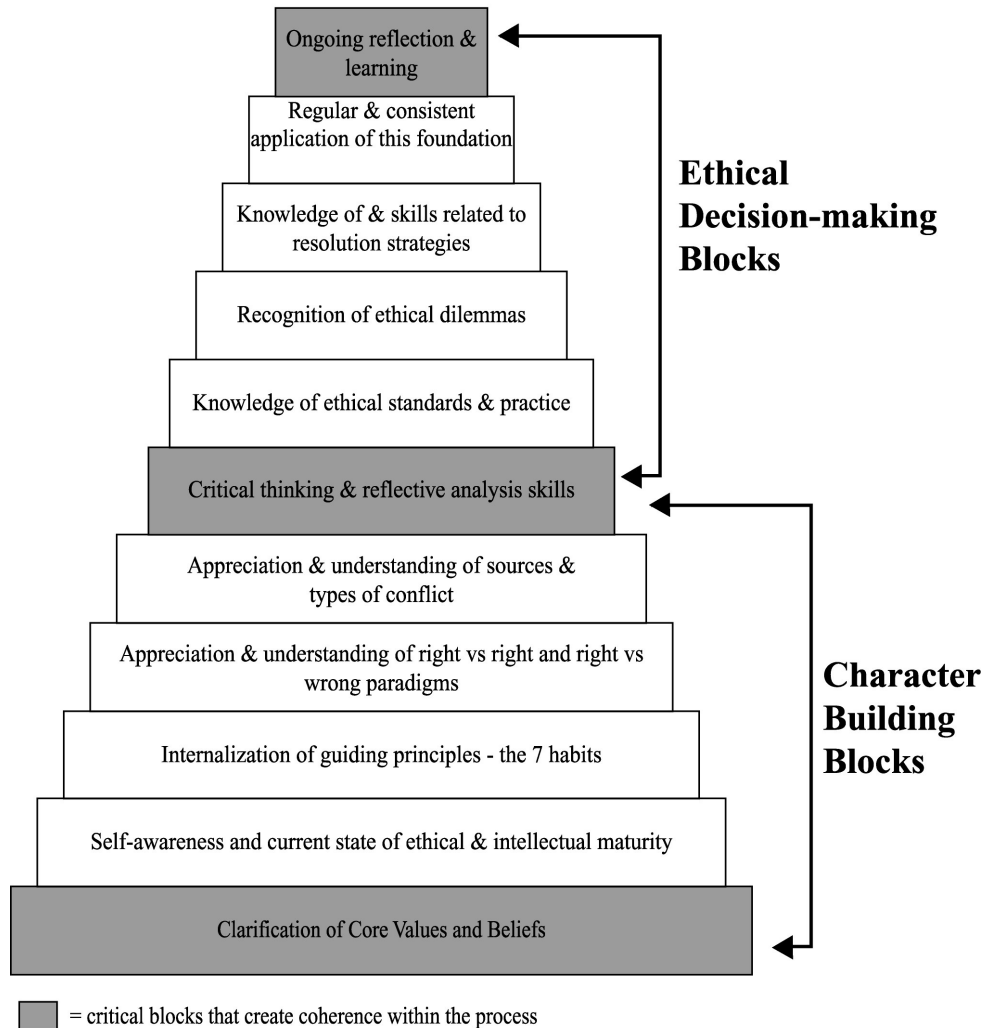◼ = critical blocks that create coherence within the process

Illustration 1

On a practical level, the learning blocks in Illustration 1 can be used as the foundation for creating a course or series of courses related to ethical decision-making. There are a variety of contemporary and insightful authors who can contribute to the theoretical base for such coursework (Appendix A). Developmentally, each block in the illustration would be addressed through a series of exercises and activities, scaffolding learning in each domain towards the achievement of higher degrees of ethical maturity and fitness. The Illustration also denotes three essential dimensions of ethical fitness:

- Values Clarification
- Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills
- On-going Reflection and Learning

Examples of exercises and activities that support the development of these three foundational dimensions of ethical decision-making allow for further exploration of how this discussion can be applied in practical terms.

Dimension 1: Values Clarification

Values clarification is a process by which students begin to identify and explore their personal values and beliefs related to a broad range of personal, community, societal and global situations. Without an understanding of what individual practitioners bring to an interpreting assignment by way of his/her own values and beliefs, we cannot learn when and how personal issues have the potential to adversely affect interpreter decision-making.

Recommended Activities:

1. *Reflective Journaling* (e.g., Covey p.106, Stewart & Witter-Merithew, In Press) - Students keep a journal throughout a course in which they must write and reflect upon significant life experiences. Teachers provide students with questions or situations to explore within their journals. Sharing journal entries openly in the course provides students with an opportunity to develop trust, self-revelation and risk taking, as well as, develop an appreciation for the importance of privacy, vulnerability and confidentiality. [See Appendix B]

2. *Exploration of Ethical Issues in Society* – Newspapers and documentaries are fertile ground for identifying ethical dilemmas. Students bring in these examples of ethical conflict and discuss their own views on the issue(s), thereby enhancing their ability to analyze a dilemma from various perspectives.

3. *Open Class Discussions* - Character attributes, such as honesty, integrity, fairness, respect, responsibility, etc., should be explored in various ways. Textbooks, articles, and research on individuals who lived lives of upstanding character (i.e. Socrates, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, etc) are sources to inspire these types of discussions. Students can begin to develop insight into the importance of these attributes to us as individuals, in our role as professional interpreters and in the lives of the consumers we serve. [See Appendix A]

4. Case Study Analysis – Case studies are used to gain a deeper understanding of specific issues and problems related to ethical decision-making. According to Nieto (1992), effective case studies are characterized as particularistic (focusing on one person or social unit), descriptive (a rich description), heuristic

(illuminates understanding and facilitates the discovery of new meanings), and inductive (because generalizations and hypotheses emerge from the examination of the data). Case studies can be used to foster the exploration of values, beliefs dilemmas and choices from various viewpoints—skills that are pre-requisites to critical thinking and reflective analysis. [See Appendix C]

Dimension 2: Critical Thinking and Analysis

In this stage of development, students begin to hone their ability to view ethical dilemma from many perspectives. They must learn to identify the ethical issue(s), critically analyze the various options for resolution, choose a course of action and answer the question why their decision is the best possible option. At this stage, students begin to explore their respective professional codes of ethics/conduct and apply their ethical duties as a professional interpreter to various situations.

Recommended Activities:

1. *Organized Debates* – Students participate in a debate exercise in which two groups work in teams to prepare arguments either for or against an issue. Debates take place in front of the full group and students observing the debate are asked to consider arguments that sway them toward a position. Requiring students to argue a position in which they may disagree, can help them develop skills in seeing conflict through another's point of view. Debate topics can be chosen from controversial issues both within and outside our field. [See Appendix D]

2. *Professional Case Study Analysis* – Various case studies, illustrating conflicts within interpreting situations, can be utilized for class or seminar discussions. Students should always be expected to answer the question "why" when stating opinions. [See Appendix C]

Dimension 3: On-going Reflection and Learning

Students exiting learning experiences focusing on ethical decision-making should leave with strategies for continued professional development. Graduates of interpreter training programs can be steered toward mentorship programs and continued educational opportunities that can provide them with collegial supervision and support while they begin their careers. New practitioners should enter the field with the understanding that the journey toward ethical fitness is career-long and must be continually assessed, as the market/consumer demands change and become more complex.

Consumers of interpreting services are at risk when interpreters, novice and veteran alike, lack a solid foundation in ethical fitness and decision-making. Enhancing the ability of practitioners to make well-informed and reliable ethical decisions is central to the professionalization process and integrity of the field, as well as central to consumer trust. It is essential that the field advance to a conscious level of *doing no harm.*

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