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# Transitioning from College to Freelancing: The Importance of Mentoring

## Introduction

In 2017 I started a research project funded by the Irish Research Council (IRC) focusing on the professional career of Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreters. This research was undertaken at Bridge Interpreting Ltd. in collaboration with the Centre for Deaf Studies (CDS), Trinity College Dublin. The study began in September 2017, only a couple of months prior to Irish Sign Language (ISL) being recognised as the third official language of the Deaf community in Ireland. December 24th, 2017 marks a historical moment after a campaign for its recognition lasting for more than thirty years. At the moment, in Ireland, there are around 121 Irish Sign Language (ISL) interpreters, Deaf and hearing, registered within the Register of Irish Sign Language Interpreters (RISLI) since RISLI was set up in December 2020.

I undertook this study in order to identify the most pressing concerns for ISL/English interpreters when practising in the field, drawing on the personal insights and experiences of interpreters in the field. The original aim of this research was to secure input from both experienced and novice professionals in Ireland. I looked at the field from the point of view of the interpreters, including the work required as an independent professional and ways to develop support resources required for those entering a field that is seeing an incredible amount of growth.

The study took a Classic Grounded Theory (CGT) methodology that helped me to identify the **key concern** of ISL interpreters with respect to their professional practice moving from college to the real world. The aim of CGT is to discover the principal concerns of participants in a specified field of study and develop a theory that will illustrate the nature of participants' concerns and how they seek to address and/or resolve the issues. The goal of CGT is to illustrate the pattern of behaviour of the participants and allow the concepts to emerge from the data during the research procedure.

By applying CGT, the main principle was to enter the field of study without any preconceived idea or predetermined concern that could influence the research study ensuring the emergent theory would be grounded on the data collected from the participants' interviews and not personal interpretation. I conducted 11 face-to-face interviews and one focus group with 5 students. The first phase of data collection was carried out with ISL/English interpreters with 0-5 years of experience. The second group included interpreters who had more than 5 years of experience and the last group was a focus group of CDS 4th year student interpreters at the end of their final year. The primary objective of this research was to understand the profession of ISL/English interpreters and thereby develop a theory that would provide relevant information to the other professionals, institutions, and stakeholders involved in the field.

## From student to professional freelancer

The journey of an ISL/English interpreter starts when transitioning from college to the freelancing workforce. When graduates transition from college to a new and unfamiliar environment such as the freelance eco-system, they often require support from more experienced professionals and organisations that will help them to shape their new

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freelancing identity. It would be ideal to develop an active eco-system where the experience and the knowledge of more experienced professional and the entities involved in the field, can have an impact on the transitioning of students when they leave education and enter the real world. As De Vos et al. (2009) state

‘...graduates often lack the career competencies needed to make a successful transformation from college to work’ (p.762).

When completing college, graduates enter the field as self-employed practitioners, which is considered a significant milestone in their career pathway. This sentiment is revealed by the following quote,

‘...they may require some guidance from more experienced instructors and interpreters as mentors...they provide an understanding of how an interpreter must approach her world, and from there work toward success’ (Janzen, 2005, p. 10).

Graduates have to integrate the theory immediately with the practice as they enter the profession, for the most part independently and without adequate support services to bridge the practical divide between academic and professional. The variety of the interpreting assignments and contexts within the field make the interpreting profession very challenging, especially at the beginning of the journey, when novice graduates' **lack of experience and limited skills and knowledge put additional pressure on already challenging situations** (Demers, 2005). ISL/English interpreters enter the freelance eco-system with the aim of building a life-long career in a profession from which they take great pride and enjoyment. The needs and requirements of the interpreter will evolve throughout their career based on the pathway they find themselves on and possible specialisation gleaned through experience.

## The key concern

The main concern that emerged from the interviews with ISL/English interpreters who participated in this study was the unregulated career trajectory that they encounter across their working lives as they navigate the new unfamiliar freelance eco-system, particularly when they are about to enter the real world and as soon as they enter the professional field.

This main concern, the unregulated career trajectory, and the associated theory that was developed on its basis - **Professionalising in a freelance eco-system** - is a way to address this concern. From the theory came a theoretical framework, the SGB model – Starting-up, Gearing-up, Branching-out, was developed as a grounded theory that could be modelled as a tool for practising sign language interpreters (and also for other professions in the freelancing field). This can be used to review their current status, their goals and what is required to achieve them while offering interpreting agencies, stakeholders and educational entities an opportunity to gain a greater insight into the life of a freelance interpreter.

**Professionalising in a freelance eco-system** seeks to explain what participants experience as they move through several points of transitioning; moving initially from college to the workplace, and ultimately, on the pathway to develop a lifelong freelance career.

## The theoretical framework: Starting up – Gearing up – Branching out (SGB)

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The SGB model is represented as a winding stair where each stage may contribute to the flourishing of a freelance profession. The pathway is illustrated as a winding stair as the career trajectory is not linear but rather an upwards spiral. While progressing upward there are aspects that need to be undertaken in order to progress towards a successful career in the field.

### Starting up

This first stage emphasises the transition from being a student to a professional freelance interpreter marking the beginning of a new journey. Starting up a new business/profession requires the development of additional skills and information in order to be able to enter the workforce. The focus at the beginning of an interpreting career is on the establishment of a professional identity. After six to twelve months in the field, interpreters realise the need to improve their skills and move forwards and upwards as well as to broaden the scope of settings within the field. The second stage is Gearing-up.

### Gearing up

Within this second stage, participants want to acquire more skills and knowledge, in order to equip themselves through more experience to develop more learning skills and use this learning experience to progress in the field. They are aware that they need to up-skill and practice their profession in several settings, with the aim to be able to increase interpreting assignments through the learning experience. Within this stage, interpreters start wondering how they can benchmark the steps by monitoring their progress. By doing the job and learning on the job, they develop knowledge and know-how. By combining all the components that might be available and helpful within the eco-system, graduates not only learn the practical side of the profession but also how they can effectively manage other aspects essential in their profession for running a successful business.

### Branching out

At this stage, Branching out, interpreters focus on persisting and mastering the profession. They want to build up a sustainable profession being able to reach the point where they have financial stability therefore a life-long career. The professional identity is clearly unfolding. The interpreter's goal now is to flourish through the creation of a professional routine and management of their workload in a way that allows them to continue progressing in their chosen field. By equipping their own profession and implementing the skills, experience and knowledge acquired throughout the journey, sign language interpreters aim at branching out in several directions within the interpreting community so as to find job satisfaction while maintaining a proactive approach for life-long self-employability. The desire is for more stability and autonomy, but in an active field where everyone should be involved - the Deaf community, agencies, stakeholders, governmental structures and educational authorities.

## Progressing through the stages

Each stage may contribute to the flourishing of sign language interpreters and, indeed, may have relevance to other freelance professions. Each stage conceptualises the experience of ISL/English interpreters in the field and how they deal with the issues they encounter. When transitioning from college through the three stages, ISL/English interpreters may look for support, mentoring and networking to overcome their lack of experience and know-how in self-employment.

## Using the theoretical model

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This theoretical model can be used to support individuals during their career development, alleviating some of the pressures that students currently experience when moving from academia to professional life and providing an understanding of the support needed. The model illustrates factors, strategies and resources that can offer dynamics to assess progress and identify opportunities for action. The theoretical framework can be utilised by anyone operating in a freelance profession where contracts vary, with many short engagements, throughout their career, to generate a clear trajectory and find ways to develop a successful professional life. Combining strategies and essential components (mentoring, self-reflecting, networking and experiential learning) can help the interpreters to progress within a nurtured eco-system rather than in isolation.

## The role of Mentoring

There was consensus amongst the participants that life in the field will always be different from the college experience. When starting a new career, the new professionals are mostly knowledgeable with theory-based experience. Several studies demonstrated the importance of mentoring during work placement and students recognise the importance of this short window as an opportunity for students heading to their future professional careers. Other studies also demonstrated the importance of mentoring as an essential component when starting a new profession and for career development in the field and how helpful it can be to prepare students for their future careers. Mentoring is considered an important aspect of the eco-system throughout transitioning and, in the long term. A suitable mentor is someone who has more experience and has a better understanding and knowledge within their professional environment because he/she has been working in the field for a long time in a variety of settings (Crocitto et al., 2005). Mentoring is considered an important factor in bridging the gap between the theoretical field and the practical field, as stated,

'Mentoring delivers career, social and emotional support for self-exploration which leads to academic and personal outcomes for students and guide them to become a successful professional' (Jain et al., 2016, p. 685)

Once in the field, their knowledge from college can be applied and shaped in each situation and by each new experience. As Leeson states

'New interpreters should set high standards for themselves and constantly strive to increase their skills. One way in which this can be achieved is by maximizing opportunities to work with respected and more experienced colleagues in the field, and seek their feedback on one's own performance' (Leeson 2005, p. 65).

The concept of mentoring emerged in the first stage of the model, although mentoring is referenced across the three stages – the need for it does not end after the first stage. More experienced interpreters consider mentoring a very important element for the progression of their career and they still have the need to interact with other experienced professionals.

Mentoring enhances the exploration of certain areas to enable individuals to learn from more experienced professionals and assist individuals to progress and reach their potential. For graduates and also more experienced interpreters, mentoring is seen as an 'anchor' where they can get assistance and help during transitioning, for debriefing, professional, emotional and personal support and also as an advisor for monitoring their progression and their career development. Dangerfield and Napier (2016) suggest that by combining self-reflective practice and at the same time being supported by ongoing mentoring, training and professional development, interpreters can

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improve their skill and stay motivated in their profession. The authors also state that there is

‘...a need for interpreters to be motivated to achieve expertise in the field by actively seeking opportunities to develop self-reflective practices and continually assess their work through collaborative and focused discussion with other interpreting professionals’ (Dangerfield and Napier 2016, p.21).

It is necessary to have such support to contribute to the development of a strong freelancing identity. I have focused on the career of ISL interpreters, although in many fields, mentoring is considered a significant element for novice professionals and also involves experienced professionals so that the novice can develop new skills and progress their career path (Delk, 2013). Thanks to this study, it was possible to apply some actions that follow from the research conducted for this research.

I have been working at the Citizens Information Board (CIB) since July 2020 and as a result of this research, CIB offered the first Mentoring Programme training for ISL interpreters in Ireland. Nine registered ISL interpreters attended a training organised by TIEM Centre (Teaching Interpreting Educators & Mentors) to become certified professional mentors in the interpreting field.

## Conclusion

The theory that emerged, **Professionalising in a freelance eco-system**, illustrates how interpreters operate and attempt to flourish within this unregulated career trajectory. This is the first study undertaken to develop a theory addressing the support needs, personal motivations and required skill sets in order to develop a successful freelancing career in sign language interpreting. By understanding the main concerns of ISL/English interpreters and what is occurring in the field, it was possible to create a new perspective, common to participants. This new theoretical framework, Starting up, Gearing up, Branching out (SGB Model), is a three-stage journey outlining the process from the transitioning journey as they enter the field, to the process of continuous professional development through experience and exposure, mastering the range of competencies required for success. Other studies encountered during this research process confirmed the complexity of issues when moving from education to work and developing a career as a freelancer. The findings in this study overlap with other studies in regard to the importance of receiving appropriate support, mentoring and guidance, in particular at the beginning of the profession.

Professionalising in a freelancing eco-system is about developing a nurturing environment where everyone can progress and where everyone can grow through the proactivity of professionals and institutes engaging for the benefit of everyone involved. It is essential to be in a nurtured eco-system rather than in isolation in order to progress in a professional career. The support and the input of more experienced people, mentors, stakeholders, and associations and therefore, collaborating with like-minded people would give graduates the opportunity to flourish by making the support more visible and provide additional services. The theoretical framework was designed as a practical model applicable to many different settings within other fields as well. Key concepts emerged within each stage flagging the support required at different stages in a career including: transitioning, mentoring, monitoring, and mastering. Reflecting on these key concepts will allow for a process of support that directly caters for the needs of ISL/English interpreters but also any other professional freelancers, giving them the best opportunity to flourish within their professional environment.

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