**Facilitating Reflective Practice Support Groups as an Interpreter**

First, I want to talk a bit about my journey: when I first qualified as an interpreter, I felt very lonely, I always thought that it was just me who had all the difficult assignments. And whenever I met a colleague, we were keen to discuss ethical dilemmas.

Later on, when I started training interpreters, I found that my students, often already practicing interpreters, faced very similar dilemmas. They were regularly turning to me for advice, looking for answers.

I felt that in order to get answers we all needed someone to speak to. But with more experience I was beginning to understand that perhaps it is not about finding answers, but about being able to share our feelings. But how can we do this within the bounds of confidentiality? Can I trust people whom I have just met, only because we are in the same profession?

I was very lucky that I had an opportunity to take part in drop-in support sessions for interpreters run by Beverley Costa as part of the Pásalo project. I would travel to London, meeting colleagues with similar concerns. Finally, I was able to share my dilemmas and cases that affected me emotionally, as well as listen to my peers and be able to discuss our feelings and ways how to deal with them. I was not alone! And all this was happening under expert supervision from Beverley.

As these drop-in support sessions developed and we understood their purpose and benefits better, we became keen to receive guidance on how to support our peers and it was very apparent that something like that cannot be done without a specific set of skills. We could see how much preparation, expert knowledge and experience were necessary to run these sessions successfully, making sure that the facilitator creates an environment of trust where everyone feels safe and equal.

I was then lucky to become part of the first apprenticeship model – learning the basics of how to facilitate confidential, reflective conversations. I particularly enjoyed observing my colleagues and being observed by them, which was followed by a very useful “deconstruction of facilitation”. We were also encouraged to practice with other participants to implement what we had learned and then give each other feedback under Beverley’s professional supervision.

Whilst this was all happening in London, we were also offered a unique opportunity to run similar sessions in Wales. The local need was clear, we already had a group of colleagues who would meet occasionally and there was a gap in provision of support for interpreters locally.

With Beverley’s initial help I gained more confidence to organise and facilitate such meetings myself and we have now been running regular sessions for almost three years. Interpreters, who themselves have many years of professional experience, are given an opportunity to reflect on their work in an environment where they don’t feel judged, where matters regarding confidentiality are clear and where the facilitator also understands exactly what interpreting in the public service sector is about and how it can make even seemingly tough professional interpreters carry an emotional burden. After all, we work with frontline workers and are there to respond to whichever crisis public services are facing at the time.

Thanks to having training and ongoing support I am now aware that as a facilitator I have many responsibilities. First on the list is always setting the ground rules, something I would have never thought of when meeting with a colleague and chatting about difficult cases over a cup of coffee: setting strict boundaries, providing a safe environment, knowing how to keep everyone informed about what is happening without interfering too much, encouraging non-judgemental conversation, and last but not least, managing time, so everyone feels included and is given fair time to talk – this is perhaps the most important skill for me personally as a facilitator. I also had to learn to listen and not to bring my own issues into the conversation, always keeping in mind that I am there to facilitate, to provide a safe space for others and to manage their expectations, so all participants can feel the benefits of such reflective practice.

I also feel privileged that I have had an opportunity to start a couple more reflective practice groups for interpreters, with colleagues of differing levels of experience, from students of interpreting to interpreters working in extremely emotionally demanding environments.

It is not an easy job, and I am sometimes confronted with my own dilemmas or emotions as a result of facilitating reflective practice support groups. Therefore, it is vital to also have my own supervision. And Beverley has thought of that: my colleague facilitators and myself attend regular “supervision of supervision of interpreters” group. This is a great opportunity to share experiences with my colleagues as well as to continue learning about reflective practice and developing my relatively new skills.

I have asked members of our Welsh group that I facilitate for their feedback, and I would like to share this with everyone who may not be sure about the benefits of reflective practice support groups for interpreters:

*“… they are good for getting together with colleagues and sharing a little of what's on our mind with people who understand, while also providing a safe and expertly moderated space for unloading difficult experiences. Just knowing that space is being held for us, makes a difference.”*

*“… it has been such a great opportunity to learn from my colleagues and have a safe place to share concerns and have feedback.”*

*“Having somebody facilitating the sessions makes them more productive and focused, as there is a structure and clear aims, and everybody is given a chance to participate, without anybody dominating the conversation of getting off-topic. As a consequence, I personally feel that my experiences and views are acknowledged and valued, and I feel I’m in a safe space.”*

*“…I feel able to share experiences, discuss ideas and concerns and enjoy mutual support…”*

*“Having experienced a time when I knew no other interpreters for years, I find the small group where I feel able to share experiences, discuss ideas and concerns and enjoy mutual support, extremely valuable, comforting and interesting.”*

*“…being a part of the support group is a way to keep in touch with interpreter colleagues, discuss and share dilemmas, learn through others' experience and reflect on my own. It also makes being an interpreter a less lonely profession and provides support, both professional and psychological.”*

And the three main observations that stand out for me are: SAFE SPACE – SHARE – SUPPORT. I hope that with the support I have as a facilitator I can keep delivering this.