

Hands Down, an Idea Whose Time has Come

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Twenty minutes? Thirty? At the discretion of the interpreter in the hot seat? However it happens, when interpreters work in teams for an extended period of time, they get to switch. Not so for the person on the other side of the equation, the person receiving the interpretation.

At the 2010 Illinois DeafBlind Retreat (ILDBR), there was a problem. During one session, where participants were expressing their thoughts about the retreat thus far, one deaf-blind participant said he was having arm problems and was very tired from all the sessions all day and receiving so much information tactually. Other participants felt the same. Options were discussed. Make the workshops shorter? Possible, but this would limit the usefulness of the workshops. Use pillows? Tried that. Not very effective. How about, the deaf-blind man suggested, giving the deaf-blind participants a break – everyone putting their hands down for two minutes at regular intervals? The clouds parted. A ray of light shone through. And the “Hands Down Rule” was born.

Receiving a steady stream of information, whether tactually or visually, is hard. Using one’s arms and hands, or one’s eyes, especially when those eyes work differently than those of the majority, to receive information, especially new information, plus processing that information in the brain, can be challenging as well as mentally and physically exhausting. The arms and eyes, unlike the ears, are largely muscle. Muscles tire in a way that ears do not. Physically, visually, mentally, energetically, it is taxing. Interpreters, who by trade receive steady streams of information, process it and reproduce it, know about physical and mental taxation. There’s only so long one can go before things start falling apart, information evaporates, accuracy deteriorates and repetitive motion injuries set in. Add to that, producing an interpretation with another person’s hand on your hand or arm, or signing in a small signing space, and physical capacity gets reduced. That’s why we switch. Yet “we” (interpreters, presenters, organizers) expect the deaf-blind people with whom we work to take in, tactually or visually, continuously, without a break, and without time to rest, process and digest, let alone being able to wiggle their fingers and stretch their arms.

The Hands Down Rule, still under development and being explored by the ILDBR, is just that - every 10-15 minutes, *everyone* puts their hands down for two minutes – the interpreters, the presenters and the deaf-blind participants. This allows everyone, not just the interpreters, to stretch their arms, hands, shoulders and neck, look around, change their depth and field of view, see what was just being talked about, take a cognitive break, and digest what they just took in.

In the beginning, it was a bit shaky. People weren’t sure why they were being asked to do this and used the time to chat or maintained an awkward silence. With time and explanation at the outset, as people understood the purpose and got used to the practice, they came to appreciate it more and more. They were able to rest and process and reduce the physical, visual and cognitive load. Complaints of sore arms at the end of the

day were reduced.

And then an amazing thing happened. With time to digest what was being presented, the deaf-blind participants started becoming more involved. During the break, they were able to formulate questions and tell the interpreters what their questions were, and when things started back up after the two-minute break, they were able to ask questions and participate in what was happening rather than just receiving information.

The Hands Down Rule was used for the second time at the 2012 ILDBR and feedback was overwhelmingly positive. At the recent NAD conference, at a session where a number of deaf-blind people were in attendance, the Rule was suggested to the presenter, who was quite willing to use it. The session lasted 90 minutes and the Rule was only used once; however, the majority of the people in attendance respected it and perhaps even benefitted from the break themselves.

There are still considerations to be explored for ways to make the Rule more effective. For example, teaching the deaf-blind participants exercises they can do during the breaks, stretches that interpreters may already use, and perhaps putting an explanation of what it is and why it is being used in the printed material people receive before events to highlight the benefits of the Rule. Also, practical matters need to be explored with some flexibility regarding how and when to call the time, how long the break should be and finesse the situation when there is no time-keeper and the presenter may be involved with their remarks. At the ILDBR, there was a time-keeper who would walk onto the stage at set intervals and announce, “Hands Down.” This approach may not work in other situations so adaptability is called for. At the NAD conference, rather than having someone officially watch the time, the presenter relied on one of the deaf-blind audience members for the amount of time for the break.

As for the future of the Hands Down Rule? According to Bryen Yunashko, a participant at the ILDBR, “I would hope to see this having widespread adoption to the point where it becomes second-nature; it’s still a bit jarring to those new to the Rule. Eventually, this Rule would help to solidify DeafBlind integration in conferences, meetings and other areas where DB folks are still trying to make inroads.” As with all great ideas whose time has come, the issue is awareness. As Yunashko says, “Awareness that different people in the audience have different needs; recognizing that there isn’t just one type of person in the audience; and embracing the diversity of it.” ■

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