

Protocol for Sign Language Interpreters working in North American Indigenous Settings

For all jobs/assignments that Sign Language Interpreters conduct, every interpreter must have credentials for American Sign Language or Lengua de señas mexicana (LSM) and/or Indigenous/ tribal sign language.

*American Sign Language requires certification in USA and Canada.
There is no certification for Lengua de señas mexicana nor Mexican Indigenous sign languages in Mexico.*

There is no certification for Indigenous/tribal sign language in USA and Canada, the preference given to the interpreters who have years of experience and training with authentic tribal sign language instructors.

Respect:

Approach/Philosophy:

1. Whereas it is typical for an interpreter to approach an interpreting assignment as a means of income and a profession that can be seen as a “job”, the Indigenous community asks for a shift in perception and a person-centered approach.
2. The Indigenous community encourages the interpreter to first consider the consumers of the interpretation services and to hold them as sacred; this means to consider both the Deaf and Hearing participants and their life journey, and what they mean to accomplish at this crossroad in their lives.
3. An indigenous event or ceremony is not merely an interpreting assignment. Instead the event should be viewed as an opportunity for interpreters to bridge Deaf and Hearing participants' unfolding life journeys that manifest in Indigenous events and ceremonies.
4. Regardless of intention or lack thereof, an interpreter makes an impact on the settings they work within and the people they interpret for. The Indigenous community asks the interpreter to take this all into consideration; to honor and respect the Indigenous community, and to have an open approach since Indigenous customs and values may be different than the interpreter's.
5. If the interpreter is in need of cultural mediation, for understanding or clarification, the interpreter should ask the designated Indigenous coordinator or appropriate contact person and not the first person nearby.

6. The Indigenous community thanks interpreters who wish to serve their community.

Indigenous Deaf people:

7. Understand that not all Indigenous Deaf people are knowledgeable (e.g. customs, values, traditions, history) about their tribes.
8. Be aware that consumers may have different signs than what an interpreter may have learned or uses on a regular basis. It is crucial for interpreters to accept instruction on preferred signs from the people they are working with at any given time, and to incorporate and use these signs as best they can.
9. When an Indigenous Deaf signer conducts a sacred ceremony in Tribal sign language (Plains Indian Sign Language, Northeast Indian Sign Language, and other language varieties within the North American Indian Sign Language), and interpreters do not know specific signs, the sign language interpreter should explain to the hearing Indigenous audience that s/he is signing in tribal signs. Furthermore, not all tribes use Plains Indian Sign Language, other tribes outside of Plains region may use their own sign languages.

Indigenous hearing people:

10. When appropriate, talk with the hearing Indigenous people to discuss the cultural and language deprivation that indigenous deaf people experience, beforehand, unless Indigenous deaf people prefer to explain their unique situation themselves (this engages use of their own indigenous Deaf agency).
11. Do not be afraid to ask the Indigenous leader/presenter/teacher/elder and others what terms to use in interpreting beforehand. When in the service of interpreting, an interpreter may encounter the speaker switching from English to their native tongue throughout their communication. A non-Indigenous interpreter may need to switch off with a team of Native interpreters during this time. Recognize your limitations and respect boundaries in such events, as an interpreter's job is interpreting.
12. Oftentimes, the person speaking will utilize their tribal spoken language. An interpreter can ask them to repeat the word by spelling the words. Most people are open to helping out with the tribal words. This is important as Indigenous interpreters are not universally available (i.e. University/college classrooms, general meetings, or tribal events in urban cities).

13. It is common on the Reservation/Reserve/Nations/Village/and other places to select “any person who know signs” to interpret. These persons (Indigenous or Non-Indigenous) should not be considered “an interpreter” because they are not qualified to translate the message. Failure to provide qualified interpreters can have grave/disastrous consequences (such as wrong placement like jail, educational placement) for Indigenous Deaf people. Tribal offices need to be educated about these problematic issues.
14. Interpreters who interpret sacred ceremonies, need to be aware that American Sign Language or Language of Signed Mexican books do not cover such tribal words that may be spoken. The Indigenous and non-Indigenous interpreters who are well versed in tribal signs would be the best fit to interpret at these tribal events, meetings, and other type of tribal activities.
15. It is best to acquire tribal signs when interpreting for an Indigenous Deaf person. It is recommended that interpreters specializing in Indigenous Deaf interpreting to attend workshops that provide this knowledge and the continuation of professional development in this area.
16. Be aware that even though index-finger-pointing is considered rude and culturally unacceptable in most Indigenous communities, it is allowed to be used with Indigenous Deaf persons by interpreters, and some bi-culturally educated Indigenous people, since ASL and LSM use index-finger-pointing for pronouns and directional purposes etc., while Indigenous/tribal sign languages do not use index-finger-pointing.
17. Instead of index-finger-pointing, as it is generally considered rude among most Indigenous communities, it is more appropriate to refer to the speaker/presenter/signer with full-hand acknowledgement. It is common for Indigenous interpreters to do lip-pointing because it may be part of their culture.

Responsibility:

18. It is the interpreter’s responsibility to ask about what topic will need interpretation, and what should not or cannot be interpreted.
19. Be aware that some sacred prayers by tribal spiritual leaders may not be interpreted. At times Interpreters/individuals may need consent to be present where such sacredness is happening. For example, some dancers are to stay silent and are not to be touched. Know your boundaries, and theirs, within the culture.

20. Interpreters may not bring counterparts such as people/family to become audiences within such events to take photos without permission of a spiritual leader. Within certain tribes photography is strongly forbidden, as their ceremonies are not made open to the public.
21. Be aware that there is a difference between a paid service and a gift (usually during community events). Not all interpreting assignments are paying jobs. Do not expect monetary payment for your service unless agreed to beforehand. Conferences, college/university jobs, and some meetings will provide payment.
22. Social media--interpreters are required to refrain from posting anything on Facebook, and any social media format that reveals picture of people, or names from your assignment. This is a viewpoint of self-promotion, it does not address inadvertent (and careless) revealing of client information. Any social media posting, check with appropriate Indigenous people to verify authenticity before you post.
23. Criminal conviction -- Human Resources at tribal office and specific assigned Indigenous Deaf Elders will be in charge of background checking on interpreter's criminal conviction record, if situation arises. It is important that we protect Indigenous people from any harm.

Beliefs:

24. If you are non-native or from another tribe, it is extremely important to recognize and respect others' Indigenous beliefs as distinct from your own. If you feel that you cannot separate your religious beliefs in an Indigenous setting, do not accept the assignment. It is best not to take the assignment if you feel you cannot put aside those personal religious beliefs that counter those of the culture you would interpret within.

Clothing:

25. Sign Language interpreters are responsible to ask the tribal/council people or the Indigenous Deaf people about what to wear at certain events. Generally, typical business attire is worn for conference-type scenarios, and casual clothing for outdoor or tribal events. You do not want to look inappropriately dressed at certain events.
26. Interpreter's garments, if ceremony or gathering participants have colorful regalia/traditional clothes then the interpreter need not come in black clothing as to dampen the spirit of the ceremony, but instead can use a light or lighter color, so long as it is muted and does not detract, overpower, or distract from the ceremonial regalia/traditional clothes.

27. During sweat lodge activity, check with each tribe's traditional spiritual leader(s) on appropriate clothing and conduct within the lodge.
28. When providing interpretation at outdoor events, be mindful of weather, heat, and duration of the cultural event — the community may not have a strict timeline to start and end.

Relationship:

29. Indigenous Deaf people and interpreters are partners in communication at all tribal events. Indigenous Deaf people will choose certain interpreter(s) they are comfortable with and whom they deem qualified, regardless of their certification levels.
30. In colleges/universities, Indigenous Deaf people have the right to choose their designated interpreters because of their knowledge in tribal culture, language, and traditional ways. This practice aligns with standard human resources practices on Tribal lands where they seek to hire Indigenous interpreters.
31. Status and role of Indigenous people: Elders are treated with great respect. The tone of interpreting for an Elder is equivalent to that of interpreting for a person who has a PhD. Spiritual Leaders are afforded the same respect and status.
32. Turn-taking in Indigenous communities differs from non-Indigenous communities, "certain American Indian groups are accustomed to waiting several minutes in silence before responding to a question or taking a turn in conversation, while the native English speakers they may be talking to have very short time frames for responses or conversational turn-taking, and find long silences embarrassing" (Saville-Troike, 2003:18). The sign language interpreter can inform the Indigenous or non-Indigenous Deaf/HH/DB at these times to, "hold, still thinking," which is preferable to "wait in silence."

Relevance:

Gender-Specific Information –

33. Within most tribes, women (including both participants and interpreters) are not allowed to engage in sacred Indigenous ceremonies during menstruation. In tribes that follow this practice, prior to a sacred ceremony, spiritual leaders might approach Indigenous deaf women and women interpreters about this restriction, although it may be assumed this is common knowledge. A replacement by another sign language interpreter during such a time *is a must*. Note: not all tribes practice this belief. This would apply to the Indigenous Deaf person and interpreters who is participating in a sacred ceremony. An interpreter at this type of event would be a shadow, who only interprets the ceremony without participating in it. Remember, an interpreter is an

outsider in such scenarios, and one who comes to convey communication of what is voiced or signed.

34. Be aware that certain ceremonies or sweat lodges have gender-specific protocols (female interpreters cannot go near all-male ceremonies or sweat lodges, and vice versa for male interpreters).
 - a. At some tribal events, there are certain gender-specific spaces; interpreter(s) need to talk to spiritual leader/elder/community leader about where you need to stand or sit prior to the event.
 - b. Be aware some tribal sweat lodges might require one to be unclothed. Interpreters need to be aware of this beforehand. Note: rarely is this a mixed-gendered occurrence.

Interpreter Placement:

1. Make ceremony or signing/talking circle plans for interpreter logistics, depending on the number of sign language interpreters present. If there are many interpreters, a placement of four chairs set in cardinal directions inside the circle would be recommended. If there are only 2 interpreters, it will mean each interpreter should take 2 cardinal directions. A category of different diagrams is attached to this protocol. Keep in mind, not all tribes have similar ceremonies or signing/talking circles. Talk to the hearing and/or Deaf leader/elders who are in charge, get their instructions, and ask for pre-ceremony preparation.
2. The placement of the interpreters in a ceremony is key and dependent on the participant's preference. A common expectation is for interpreters to be outside the circle yet still in the line of sight to those watching the interpreter. There exist many tribes in Mexico and a standardized interpreting system is not in place because of so much diversity. At this point it is best for an interpreter to take guidance from the local tribe they are being asked to work with.

Awareness:

35. Be aware and conscientious that the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and Registry of Interpreters for the Deaf (RID) standards do not apply to Native Reservations in the USA. The same is true for the Association of Visual Language Interpreters of Canada (AVLIC) for Canada. There is no certification system in Mexico.
36. Eye Contact: It is important to know that eye contact between the sign language interpreters and Indigenous Deaf people is acceptable, but when you are in Indigenous communities, do not ask or demand an Indigenous person/people to make eye contact

with you or the Indigenous Deaf person, it might be their cultural protocol to not make eye contact.

Reciprocity:

Dances or Tribal Events –

37. When any Indigenous Deaf or Indigenous hearing person asks you to participate in any event or dance, do not decline the offer, it might be perceived as disrespectful to the Indigenous people.

38. Interpreters can participate in giveaways or blanket dance, which involves a donation to the Indigenous hearing or Deaf people who need the funds to go back home or for a certain purpose.

39. Above all else, it is best to ask an Indigenous person involved with the activity first, and to prepare and provide your service accordingly.

Insight for Non-Indigenous Hearing Interpreters:

Traditional Interpreter Roles –

In general, interpreters in non-Indigenous settings have taken on a role that strives for very little interference, influence, or manifestation of the interpreter's engagement as a separate entity. This stems from a history of ethically trying to do no harm. This has led to the stigmatization of the old role model labels such as "helper," and leads to the more accepted term of "ally." However, the role of designated interpreter (DI) has slowly come to be a mixture of the behaviors of many of these old and new roles, with, perhaps, some enhancements.

Designated Interpreter role:

A DI's role can vary hour by hour or day by day. Each Deaf professional (DP) has different needs at different times, which should be part of the DP/DI team planning. A DI works closely with a DP, so much so, that his/her knowledge of the setting and context of the DP's work is in-depth. Many of the interpreted situations go smoothly because the DI can anticipate or predict what a DP will express before they start a sentence. The DI and DP become a team. The DI can and should interact with the DP's hearing colleagues as a separate individual, showing their humanity. This ensures trust and smooth collaboration between the hearing and DP/DI team. It also allows for the DI (and thus the DP) to understand the contextual culture of the work environment. Rumors, inside jokes, stories about who ate the last donut in the break room, and general information become mandatory interpreter

knowledge to convey to the DP. Being a DI allows the power imbalance between hearing colleagues (including interpreter) and Deaf to begin to balance out. A team must be flexible and cohesive. A DI must adapt to situations quickly and smoothly, giving information from the environment to the DP. DP/DI teams save time and lower stress. By showing adaptability, DPs have more opportunity to advance their careers. With professional assigned interpreters of a more neutral role, DPs become frustrated when working with non-designated interpreters who are unfamiliar with interpreting in Indigenous terminology, acronyms, context and cultural norms.

Role in Indigenous Contexts:

The specific cultural and ethical expectations in Indigenous contexts are paramount when considering your interpreting role — behaviors and perceptions. Knowing the complexities of such an assignment discussed in this Protocol, a non-Indigenous interpreter should shift towards a more designated interpreter role: expect that you will be addressed as the person you are, and need to interact on your own behalf, as well as providing constant communication access to whomever needs it, just as in the above role explanation of a DI. This means preparations are much more than reviewing the text of a presentation or knowing the names of participants. Preparation includes learning that setting's schema. For example, as a field interpreter, you may be expected to participate in whatever type of physical work your DP is engaging in; if all of the women of the family are gathering berries, and your DP is helping, the DI will be gathering berries, too — this is a show of reciprocity on the part of the interpreter. You must also recognize your privilege and the power disparity between some Indigenous Deaf and their hearing tribal members. Deaf tribal members may lack tribal knowledge, understanding, or have misconceptions due to lack of communication and/or education. You must be adaptable, with respect. Respect that you have power that must be used with responsibility to the people. The people and their relationships are more important than the work.

This protocol has been developed by Melanie McKay-Cody (Cherokee), Armando Castro (Mixteca), Tim Curry (Non-Indigenous), Amy Fowler (Non-Indigenous), Ren Freeman (Eastern Shoshone/First Nation Cree), Crescenciano Garcia, JR. (Aztec), Paola Morales (Nahua/Pipil and fromestiza) Evelyn Optiz (San Carlos Apache) and Wanette Reynolds (Cherokee).

Reviewed by Kevin Goodfeather (Dakota), Natasha Terry (Navajo), Hallie Zimmerman (Winnebago), and James Wooden Legs (Northern Cheyenne).

Diagrams to be used for powwows, signing circles, meetings, and ceremonies

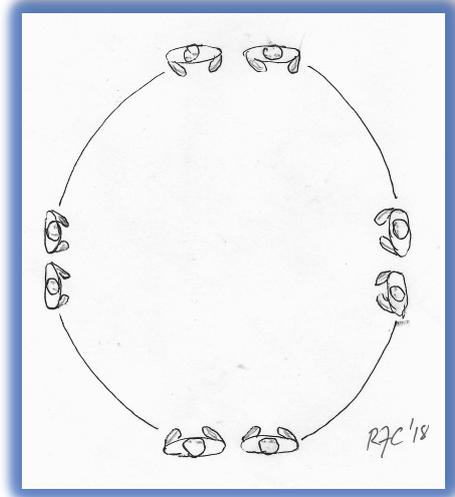


Figure 83: Diagram of Prayer Ceremony Circle. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018

This is a prayer ceremony circle created by Melanie McKay-Cody for the purpose of full language access to hearing and Deaf Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) people. The Indigenous Spiritual Leader or Person who leads the Prayer will stand in the middle of the circle and sign the Prayer. There are 4 hearing interpreters who are at the right side of the person signing the Prayer and on the left side will be Deaf “copy” interpreter for the other Deaf people to see.

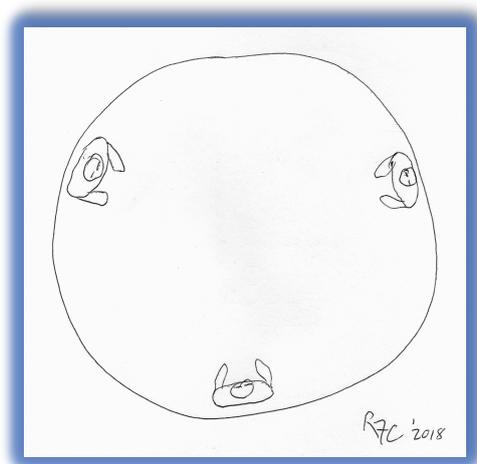


Figure 84: Diagram of Mohawk Spiritual Gathering. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

The Spiritual gathering circle was created by Tina Terrance of the Mohawk tribe in New York, in 2006. The circle can be used as a Prayer Circle or “meeting” circle where everyone gathers together to talk in the circle.

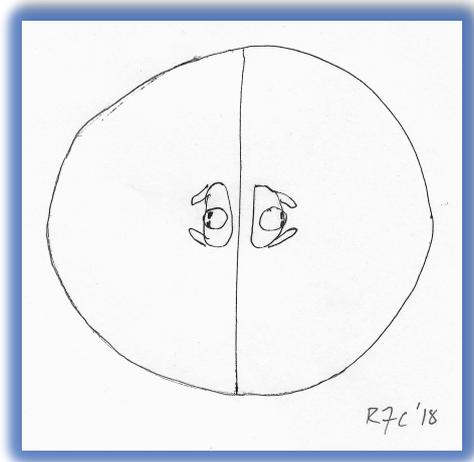


Figure 85: Diagram of Two interpreters in semi-circle. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

When there are only two interpreters at a site, and if there are hearing participants in the circle with Deaf participants, the interpreters will position themselves within a semi-circle. Melanie McKay-Cody creates this; it can be for a Signing/Talking circle or meeting circle.

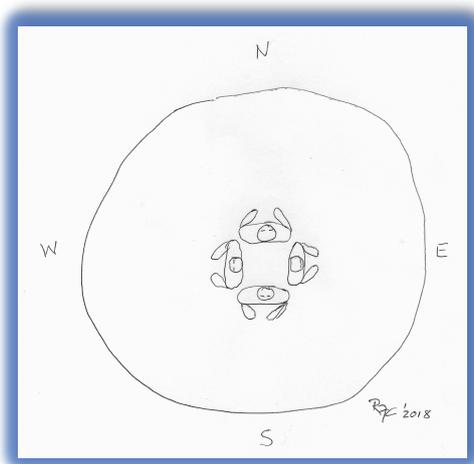


Figure 86: Diagram of four interpreters in Talking/Signing Circle. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

This is a very symbolic of Indigenous culture, where the four cardinal directions are set in the middle of the Signing/talking circle that involves hearing and Deaf Indigenous participants (it can be use for other purpose in the circle). This is created by Melanie McKay-Cody.

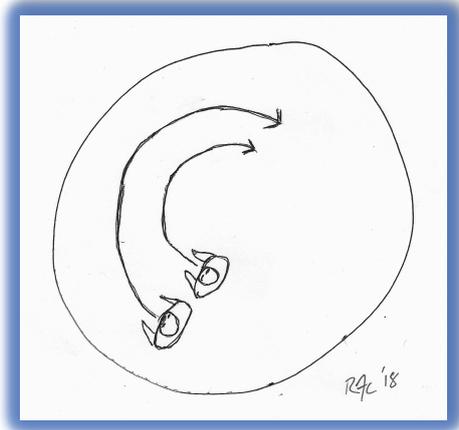


Figure 87: Diagram of interpreter accompanying Pow-Wow dancer. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

This is an example where the interpreter is involved with the dancer; they dance together and the interpreter will interpret what is being said by the Emcee, or other announcements. This is created by James Wooden Legs.

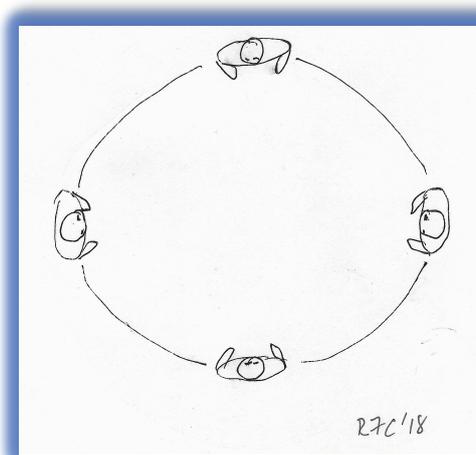


Figure 88: Diagram of four interpreters in cardinal directions. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

The interpreters standing in four cardinal directions and symbolic of our Indigenous culture, the Indigenous Deaf dancer(s) will be able to see interpreters at their line of vision while s/he or they move around the circle at Pow Wow or any dance event. It is produced by James Wooden Legs.

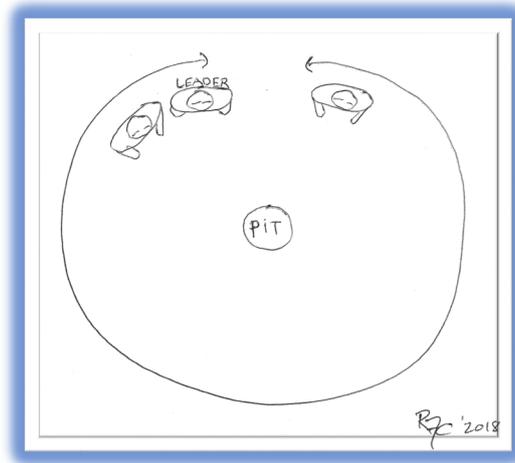


Figure 89: Diagram of same-gender sweatlodge. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

This is typical sweatlodge where interpreter sits next to the Spiritual leader or at the opposite site of the flap of the sweatlodge. This is developed by consensual agreement from past Intertribal Deaf members. The position of the interpreter can be adjusted depending on the sweatlodge Deaf participant and/or DeafBlind participant. Typically the DeafBlind interpreter will sit next to the DeafBlind participant anywhere within the sweatlodge.

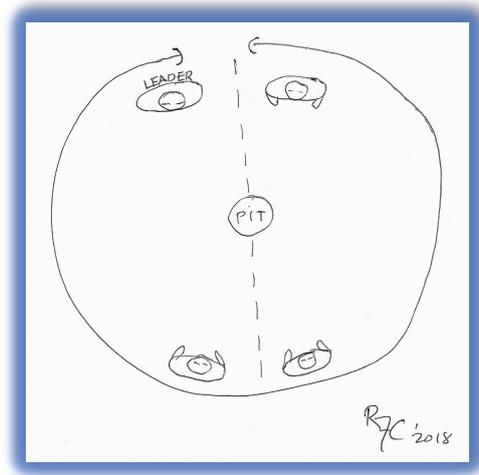


Figure 90: Diagram of all-gender sweatlodge. Drawn by Robert Cody, Jr., 2018.

This sweatlodge positioning was created by past Intertribal Deaf members. The leader sits near the “door” of the sweatlodge. At the back of the sweatlodge, one side is the female side, and the female interpreter sits in that place. On the opposite side is the male interpreter. The one by the door either follows gendered side or either gender interpreter can sit there. It is important to ask the Spiritual leader which is the most appropriate placement because she or he is in charge of the sweatlodge. If the Spiritual leader has never conducted one with a Deaf participant, the responsibility is transferred to the Indigenous Deaf participant to decide the position.

Citation: McKay-Cody, Melanie, “Memory Comes Before Knowledge-North American Indigenous Deaf: Socio-cultural Study of Rock/Picture Writing, Community, Sign Languages, and Kinship.” (Ph.D. Diss., University of Oklahoma, 2019).