Service-learning and social activism: a case of sign language translators in Hong Kong

Dr Red Chan
Lingnan University
How the journey began...

• Becoming involved in service-learning at Lingnan University: inspirations from a trip to the US in summer 2013.
• Personal calling; institutional support
• My pilot research project “Engaged Scholarship, Translation Education and Student Empowerment” (2014-15)
• This paper discusses the initial findings of my research
Engaged Scholarship, Translation Education and Student Empowerment

- Key perspectives:
  - Engaged scholarship
  - Translation education
  - Student empowerment

- Survey: deaf community, interpreters, hearing users
  - In-depth interviews of 20 practising sign interpreters
  - Students’ qualitative feedback
Engaged Scholarship

• Bridging academia and deaf community in HK

• Charities:
  – HK Association for the Deaf (as Consultant on accreditation of sign language translation course);
  – Children of Deaf Adults Hong Kong (as Director, mentor, trainer)

• Outcomes
  – Articles
  – Sign interpreter activists forum
A Win-Win Situation - Starting with the Tragedy of a Student with Hearing Impairment

Last summer, I chanced upon the story of Li Ching, who lost most of her hearing as a result of illness in childhood. With courage and iron will, though, Li Ching managed to overcome countless hurdles and got 2A3BC2 in the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination in 1999. She indeed set the history for the hearing impaired in Hong Kong. With such a glorious accomplishment, she became a student in Social Sciences at Lingnan University. When she graduated with an Upper Second Class Honors Degree, however, Li Ching discovered the world was harsher than she ever knew. She was not able to find a decent job. The best she could secure was a clerical position in the Spastics Association of Hong Kong. When the end, bad luck and frustration took its toll and Li Ching leapt to her death in 2008. She was only 26 years old.

I never taught Li Ching but the story of her tragically short life fed me into contemplating the gap between ideals of education and hard life realities.

Many would consider the academy an ivory tower, I used to think like that too. Research and teaching seemed removed from the social context. But Li Ching’s story has inspired me to think otherwise. I ask myself: what can I do, as a university teacher, to help prevent tragedies like Li Ching’s from ever happening again?
2014.12.06

Forum on sign translators and the Umbrella Movement

Hosted by Dr. Red Chan, Dept. of Translation, Lingnan University
Translation education & student empowerment

- Sign translation: breaking a new ground in the discipline of Translation Studies
- Raising the profile of sign translation; increasing awareness of challenges facing the training and professional practice of sign translators
- Pedagogical benefits: students have exposure to an otherwise hidden group of translators/interpreters
- Students’ positive feedback
- Outcomes: published web materials, training handbook, a short film; subtitled films for the Deaf Film Festivals (2014 & 2015); student articles
A case study: sign translators and HK’s Umbrella Movement, 2014

• Marginality of sign language and deafness
• Language power and politics of translation.
• Activist-translators have played a pivotal role in assisting deaf people to take part in the Umbrella Movement (Sept-Nov 2014).
• Social activism: sign translators assisted deaf people to “voice” their concerns for social justice, become informed and educated of the subject matter, and be involved in various acts of resistance.
Concluding remarks / critical reflections

• Values of socially-engaged scholarship / research / teaching ➔ creating win-win situation for various stakeholders.

• Service-learning empowers both the scholar and her students; it offers new frontiers for academic development, and experiential learning through services is more effective than classroom teaching.