

‘I have chosen two amazing careers’



After over a decade as an SLI, a eureka moment showed **Omoyele Thomas** what was missing in the profession. She explains why she decided to help fill it, by training as a professional supervisor

I became a BSL Interpreter in May 2002, RSLI in February 2006 and a professional supervisor in November 2015. In this article, I am going to describe my journey and what led me to both careers.

I started my training as a BSL interpreter by chance, having encountered BSL for the first time at 17 years old when some teachers at my school had called an assembly, very excited about a new course they had all enrolled on together. They showed us the basics; I was hooked and enrolled on the same course alongside my A Levels. I loved it and it opened my eyes to this new world I had not yet discovered. I was so inspired that I changed my whole career path, which was headed towards accountancy, and applied to the only university at the time that offered a course involving BSL.

Coming from a strict Nigerian family that believed academic career paths were

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superior to vocational ones, it was a big deal convincing my father that this path would be more beneficial and fulfilling for me.

I ended up luckily not having to take a gap year to complete my Level 1 and 2 (as it was back then) because I was offered a place at Wolverhampton University on the very first Foundation Level course which then led to the degree in Interpreting BSL and English. This meant a total of four years of study, which I was more than happy to embark on. I have not looked back since. I have now been working as an interpreter for nearly 17 years and look back on my career with an immense sense of achievement.

Right from the get-go, I specialised in mental health, and this has been a staple all the way though my career, albeit with some necessary breaks from this domain along the way. Mental health can be quite a demanding domain where vicarious trauma can be experienced and, to keep myself safe, I have taken breaks from it at times to ensure I was not ‘holding’ too much which could affect other aspects of my life. I have found this helpful in ensuring longevity in this domain,



returning and practising safely and looking after myself; supervision has since definitely supported me every step of the way.

Apart from mental health, I can say that I have dipped my toe into practically every different domain along the way, doing a lot of police and court work earlier in my career but ultimately stepping back from this once my daughter came along. Recently, I have been doing a lot of performance interpreting and this has reignited my passion for the profession.

Eureka!

I often reflect on how lucky we are in the sign language interpreting profession, that we get an insight into so many different realms and experiences and do consider it an utter privilege. It was through one such booking that I came across professional supervision, something very different to line management supervision and any other type that I had interpreted previously. This assignment was a training course for senior management to explore their styles of supervision and look at how this could be adapted into a more supportive exercise for their employees. It offered the chance to explore the impact of the work on their staff and it felt like a eureka

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moment – this was what was missing in our profession.

As interpreters, we often start a booking and exit without any time to reflect on the impact said booking has had on us. I know that, after my daughter was born, coming back to work was hard and interpreting what would be classed as a routine booking such as a doctor’s appointment turned into a traumatic experience; I had to witness a baby having his routine immunisations, an experience which prompted me to burst in to tears. I felt awful for letting my emotions show and felt I had let the mother down. I hadn’t realised how much I was carrying with me and how much I needed an avenue through which to empty this metaphorical ‘jar.’

Stepping into supervision

I was then prompted to look into mentoring as I wanted to become that avenue that interpreters could take to ensure they were looking after themselves and exploring their reactions to their work. Unfortunately, this did not come to fruition, as the ASLI Mentoring Course had ended. Still on the search for what was missing in the profession, I was by chance invited to join a new supervision group facilitated by a psychologist trained as a supervisor. Prior to this, I was going to trusted colleagues and my partner to help me unpick issues. I wanted a clear separation and did not want the issue of confidentiality to get in the way of

me expressing myself to ensure I was practising safely and looking after myself. My supervision group was invaluable for this, as we worked to a contract and within a safe space. I felt I had finally got the balance right. I still attend monthly supervision but have now chosen to attend individual supervision for my interpreting practice.

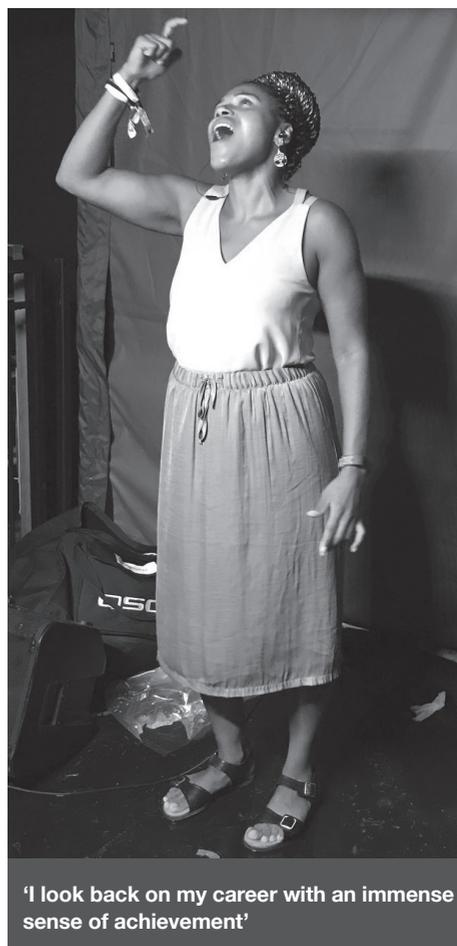
360 Supervision

Fate once again stepped in and the very first Diploma in Supervision for Sign Language Interpreters was advertised by 360 Supervision; I jumped on it straight away. I would then have to wait a further year before this was able to commence. Besides my training to become an interpreter, this was the single most impactful training I have ever experienced. It changed me as a person and changed my outlook on life, for which I will be eternally grateful. It was an experiential and immersive course where you not only trained to become a professional supervisor but got to hold a mirror up to yourself and explore parts of you that you might not have accessed before.

While still working as a full time BSL Interpreter, I attended the course that ran from January 2015 to November 2015 and involved heading up to the Midlands for a long weekend every two months. The hours were long but they were worth every minute.

Alongside that, there were assignments, presentations, case studies and the

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requirement to practice as a professional supervisor in your own time. As a trainee supervisor, I offered my services free of charge while I developed and honed my skills, something which I am grateful to my supervisees for giving me the opportunity to do through that year.

It involved a total of 150 hours of study but it was all worth it in the end as I became one of the first cohort of qualified professional supervisors in November 2015 and have

been practising ever since. Part of the requirement of a supervisor is to attend consultative supervision, where I discuss my supervisory practice and so this is something that I also build into my practice on a monthly basis.

Professional supervision and NRCPD supervision

I now aim to leave at least one day a week free for my supervision clients and have built up my client base slowly but surely. Professional supervision is still growing slowly in the profession and my ideal would be to see it become an essential part of every BSL interpreter’s continual professional development. I think there are still issues with people’s understanding of ‘Professional Supervision’ and the difference between that and the ‘NRCPD Supervision’, which requires one to look at someone’s skills and abilities as an interpreter and sign them off as compliant and skilled enough to enable them to work within the profession. The dual use of the name ‘supervisor’ is still the main sticking point, so prefixes should always be used to discern the difference.

Professional Supervision works in a very different way and is able to offer different functions such as Formative (Educative), Normative (Accountability) and Restorative (Support). In any given session, I find that I can cover all three functions and have to adapt to the needs of my supervisee.

You don’t need to have a problem

Another myth is that you need to bring a ‘problem’ to supervision. Yes, issues do get unpicked and supervisees are challenged within a session, but I have also covered positives, been able to praise and recognise a job well done and watched professionals

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grow and flourish as they enter new domains or challenge themselves.

Lightbulb moments

There is nothing more satisfying than a supervisee having a lightbulb moment where they stumble across a realisation that they may not have identified if reflecting by themselves. I offer a safe space to reflect, explore, hold a mirror up to them and always feel honoured to have these professionals trust me to guide them through any issues they wish to bring. The supervisory relationship always develops over time and thus trust and openness follows.

Money matters

I’m often asked if it is financially viable to become a professional supervisor; you could normally expect to charge £40-£80 for an hour’s session. Charging by the hour, with a smaller client base, supervision does not bring in as much income as from pure interpreting, where you charge a half day or full day fee, but for me, my passion outweighs the financial gain and I’m lucky I get to do a bit of both. I’ve chosen two amazing careers that I am passionate about and look forward to what lies ahead. ▲

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Those looking to find a professional interpreter supervisor can go to www.labyrinth supervision.com to search from a list of us all spread out around the country.