Job Shadowing: Promoting the Profession from the Comfort of Your Own Home

By Lillian Clementi

If you like the idea of school outreach, but can’t stand the thought of public speaking, here’s an alternative: job shadowing. It’s a low-pressure, one-on-one approach to school outreach that can pack a powerful punch. For some practical insights into job shadowing, the Chronicle talked to experienced ATA members, the students they’ve hosted, and the coordinators of Hartwick College’s award-winning MetroLink program, one of the most comprehensive job shadowing initiatives in the U.S.

So what is it already?

Job shadowing involves inviting a student into your workplace for all or part of a business day to give a young person a chance to “try on” your profession for the day. Your shadow may be anyone from an eighth-grader to a second-year graduate student, but the purpose is the same: an honest, hands-on look at what your job is like.

In short, it’s a way to do school outreach without the terrors of public speaking—and without ever leaving the comfort of your office. No ties, no pantyhose, no sweaty palms.

Why should I do it?

Because it gives you a chance to set the record straight. Many teachers and guidance counselors still believe that teaching is the only career path for students of foreign languages, or that translation and interpreting are being replaced by Babelfish and handheld interpreting devices. As a result, some teachers actively discourage students from studying foreign languages—at a time when language skills are increasingly critical to the security and economic competitiveness of the U.S.

By stepping in to fill the gap, we can shape the future in a very real way, educating the next generation of language professionals (and clients!) about the limits of computer translation and the specialized knowledge and experience required for quality human translation. Done right, this will ultimately raise standards and compensation for everyone in the profession. At the very least, one student will leave your office with a realistic idea of the demands of the profession and what it takes to do it well. There’s no telling how important that can be. As job shadowing host and ATA director Dorothee Racette writes, “I got a thank-you note from the kid, and he is determined to become a translator! Who knows, he may be ATA president in 30 years.”

Okay, you’ve got a point. So what do I do once the kid’s in my office?

Here are a few ideas.

1. Decide what your own comfort level is. Think about the kinds of questions you might get and decide what’s fair game and what isn’t—and be ready with a courteous response that lets your shadow know when a question is out of bounds. A useful list of common topics can be found at www.reachoutmichigan.org/exploringsci/shadowtips.html.

2. Listen before you talk. If you can, talk to the student before she comes to your office. If not, begin your shadowing session by getting to know her a bit. Useful questions might include:

   • What is her background?
   • What has she studied?
   • How fluent is she in her acquired language(s)?
   • How well does she write in her target language?
   • How much does she already know about translation and interpreting?
   • What kinds of work does she think she’d like?

Getting acquainted upfront pays off in several ways. In addition to allowing you to adapt your approach to your shadow’s age and education level, knowing her needs will enable you to identify the primary purpose of the exercise and manage your time effectively.

3. Once you’ve sounded the kid out, focus on plugging holes in his knowledge. What does he need to know about fluency, skill levels, programs of study, language careers, and the translation and interpreting professions? Racette recalls hosting a middle school student who was interested in a career using French: “The student was well prepared, but he had never heard of exchange programs. Canada is less than 50 miles to the north! I encouraged him to study in a French summer program.”

It’s a good idea to stress a few core points:

• Translation is written and interpreting is spoken: they’re two different skills. If your shadow isn’t familiar with the difference, demonstrate with a few examples.
• Being bilingual isn’t enough to make you a translator or interpreter: you need additional training. Highlight education requirements and helpful life experiences. Emphasize the need for excellent English vocabulary, grammar, and writing in addition to foreign language skills.

• Translation is more than word substitution. Give specific examples of bad or literal translation and challenge your shadow to improve on them.

• Machine translation isn’t going to replace human translators anytime soon. Try running source-language text through Babelfish. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of machine translation.

• Foreign language skills pay off in the workplace. Highlight the need for language proficiency in hospitals, schools, and courts, in the entertainment world, and in international law and business. Emphasize that language skills are an advantage in any of the well-known professions (doctors, engineers, nurses, business executives).

4. Make the shadowing experience very concrete. Most students have a limited range of experience—that’s why this exercise is so valuable. “Make it as realistic as possible,” says Lara Sanford, coordinator of MetroLink’s Washington, DC Program. Possible activities include:

• Reviewing the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages scale of language levels. (Go to www.actfl.org and click on “Proficiency Guidelines” at the bottom of the home page.)
• Searching the Internet for colleges and universities that offer training programs in T&I.
• Running a source-language text through Babelfish.
• Looking at the ProZ search engine or ATA’s online directories and checking resumes.
• Reviewing ATA’s website (www.atanet.org) and the association’s code of conduct and the certification and continuing education requirements.
• Reviewing draft or completed translations and/or glossaries (make sure they aren’t confidential!).
• Researching terms online with Google or other terminology databases.

Most of these exercises are useful regardless of the student’s age, though older or more advanced students can take them to a higher level. As you go through each activity, explain what you’re doing and encourage questions. For more ideas, visit ATA’s school outreach website at: www.atanet.org/ata_school/welcome.htm.

5. Be honest about the profession. This isn’t a sales job—it’s about the real deal. Balance the glamorous interpreting assignments and dream clients with the bizarre deadlines, unrealistic demands, and late nights.

6. Handle the issue of rates with caution. Use ranges rather than isolated figures, and point out that there are no standard rates within the profession. For example, ATA’s Translation and Interpreting Compensation Survey found that the average 2001 income for full-time independent translators and interpreters ranged from $30,090 to $64,234, depending on level of experience. The bottom line: you can earn up to six figures as a translator or interpreter if you work full-time, specialize, invest in yourself through professional development, and diligently build up your practice.

What if the kid hates it?
Don’t feel like the Lone Ranger: you’re not the first, and you certainly won’t be the last. Hartwick’s MetroLink seminar prepares students for this eventuality, and hosts should be prepared for it as well. Though most are very enthusiastic, “some students come away saying, ‘What I thought I wanted to do isn’t what I wanted to do,’” says Andy Leighton, a Hartwick alumna and member of the Washington, DC MetroLink Committee.

“It’s just as important to knock stuff off your list as to add to it,” Leighton adds. So don’t have any regrets if your shadow decides your job isn’t for him: you’ve done him an enormous favor.

So how do I get started?
Think about the age level you’d be most comfortable with, and contact a conveniently located school to offer your services. The guidance counselor’s office is a good place to start. If you’re located in Boston, New York, or Washington, Hartwick’s MetroLink program is an excellent choice. A detailed description of the program is available at www.hartwick.edu/x1965.xml. For more information, contact Shannon Forbes, director of Career Services, at (607) 431-4433 or forbes@hartwick.edu.

I don’t suppose there’s any instant gratification involved?
Well, yes, now that you mention it, there is. Job shadowing isn’t just about the future. Taking a would-be
language professional on a virtual tour of your field, even for just a few hours, will give you a new perspective on your work. "I spent a whole morning looking at the forest instead of the trees," said one job shadowing host. "I found myself asking new questions and looking for ways to work smarter and better."

Finally, as Racette notes, "It's energizing to see newcomers who are excited about the field." Many shadows are fascinating and entertaining people, and in selective programs like MetroLink they tend to be self-starters and go-getters. Connecting with a bright kid who's enthusiastic about a career in languages can be enormously rewarding. "I really appreciated your advice and candidness..." wrote one MetroLink student to her ATA host, "I can honestly say that you have given me hope for the future!"