THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION EDUCATION AND “HUMANITIES PLUS” IN LIBERAL EDUCATION

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Abstract
During the past few years, many scholars have been re-evaluating both the “what” and the “how” of liberal education. These re-evaluations have sought to define liberal education in ways that go far beyond the classic formulations of the Yale Report of 1828 and Cardinal Newman’s *Idea of a University*. In particular, the new definitions emphasize the need for pragmatic and experiential education along with Newman’s “cultivation of the intellect.” For several reasons, translator education fits this modern approach to liberal education quite well. First, as students develop translation competence, they hone the critical thinking skills associated with traditional liberal education. Second, as students fulfill translation internships in community settings, they gain practical experience that helps them see how their critical thinking skills apply to the professional world. The Spanish translation major at Brigham Young University illustrates how such an experiential program can work.

Keywords
Liberal education, translation competence, interpreting, internships

Debate about liberal education—its definition, its goals, its value—has been especially acute during the global economic downturn of the past several years. A recent comment from Utah state senator Howard Stephenson illustrates the feelings of many people. On 1 February 2011, Senator Stephenson explained his opposition to a higher-education funding bill in a rather colorful way. With specific reference to non-technical disciplines such as philosophy, Stephenson argued that students who graduate in such disciplines face bleak employment prospects: “They wake up to the stark reality that there is no job. The return on investment is stark. The taxpayers are subsidizing degrees to nowhere in many cases” (Romboy, online). Stephenson’s argument underscores the fact that a liberal arts degree does not prepare students for a specific career. Indeed, there is probably no liberal arts professor who has not had a student ask some version of the following question: “So, what can I do with a liberal-arts degree?” While professors’
initial reaction to this question may be to feel defensive, the question deserves a response. After all, the students asking the question are usually those who are passionate about the liberal arts.

Typically, the answer to the question of “What can I do?” is that the liberal arts promote intellectual and creative abilities that will help students succeed throughout their working lives. Different universities, however, are moving beyond this answer by helping liberal-arts students identify and apply their skills before graduation. In doing so, these universities are trying to implement modern thinking about what liberal education should be, specifically, the idea that liberal education should include experiential and pragmatic learning.

Translation/interpreting education—preparing students who want to work as professional translators and interpreters—fits well within this modern approach to liberal education. As this paper will show, students who develop translation/interpreting competence develop the intellectual skills valued in traditional models of liberal education. At the same time, this paper will demonstrate that translation/interpreting competence requires the experiential and pragmatic learning promoted by modern liberal-education models. Part I reviews how the modern approach to liberal education has evolved from more restrictive approaches. Part II describes how translation/interpreting study fits within the goals of liberal education. Part III reviews the literature on translation competence and provides a description of how successful translation programs work. Part IV describes Brigham Young University’s translation program, placing particular emphasis on the role of internships within the school’s “Humanities Plus” program. Part V concludes with recommendations for schools seeking to improve their existing translation programs or create new ones.

I. Evolving Views of Liberal Education

In 2008, D. G. Mulcahy published The Educated Person: Toward a New Paradigm for Liberal Education. In that book, Mulcahy reviews the trajectory of thought about what constitutes liberal education in Western cultures. Mulcahy notes that while no particular definition of liberal education has ever been universal, the predominant approach has been that associated with John Henry Newman’s Idea of a University. This predominant or traditional approach understands liberal education as “cultivation of the intellect, the object of which is ‘intellectual excellence’” (Mulcahy 4). This intellectual development emphasizes “broad knowledge and understanding in the humanities and the sciences, well-developed intellectual skills, and mental discipline” (Mulcahy 7). The broad knowledge required for such intellectual excellence is distinct from specialized or professional knowledge—the kind of practical knowledge necessary for a particular vocation.
Several modern scholars have criticized Newman’s focus on intellectual development as being too narrow. Jane Roland Martin, for example, has argued that Newman’s approach risks turning people into mere observers of the world rather than active participants in it. She argues that liberal education should seek to develop “the whole human being” (138). This whole human being applies “the three Cs of care, concern and connection” to ideas, other people, and living things (131). Applying these three Cs requires practical and experiential knowledge as well as critical thought. A person with this combination of abilities participates actively in a family—in a home—as well as in the greater society as a citizen.

Like Martin, a trio of scholars has argued for a role for experiential knowledge in liberal education. In 1998, Joseph L. DeVitis, Robert W. Johns, and Douglas J. Simpson edited a collection of papers entitled To Serve and Learn: The Spirit of Community in Liberal Education. In their extensive introductory paper, DeVitis et al stated the following: “Ideally, we envision a rich linkage between liberal and service-learning that will permit students to be critically reflective participants in whichever settings or callings they choose to enter” (13). In other words, DeVitis et al believe that service-learning can help liberal-arts students apply their critical-thinking skills to real-life situations.

Taking his cue from scholars like Martin and DeVitis et al, D.G. Mulcahy argues that liberal education should prepare students for life, not just intellectual life. Specifically, he describes the educated person as a “person of many-sided development” (179). Among other things, this person can “build upon know-how” by critically examining the unspoken assumptions that undergird know-how (179). Practical knowledge, in other words, makes theoretical knowledge—the ability to theorize that is so celebrated in traditional liberal education—fully possible.

II. Translation/Interpreting Study as Part of a Liberal Education

Liberal education concerns investigating what makes people human. Michael Oakeshott, for example, describes liberal education as learning “what an associated set of human beings have created for themselves beyond the evanescent satisfaction of their wants” (28). Through such learning, students free themselves “from the distracting business of satisfying contingent wants” (28). Of course, satisfying contingent wants—understanding a computer manual, baking a cake, reading world news, brokering communication in a hospital or a courthouse—is often the purpose behind translation/interpreting work. By emphasizing the purpose of a translated/interpreted text, one can characterize translation/interpreting themselves as highly utilitarian and therefore not liberating at all. That is, critics could argue that translation/
interpreting’s utilitarian nature should bar translation/interpreting study from any liberal-arts program. Quite recently, in fact, certain German scholars used this “too utilitarian” argument against translation programs in their own institutions (Anderman and Rogers 64). But the critics’ argument relies on a false identity: it equates product and process. To be sure, translated texts often help satisfy contingent wants. That utilitarian purpose, however, does not mean that translation study itself is not liberating.

Curiously, the “too utilitarian” argument against translation and/or interpreting sounds remarkably similar to the arguments sometimes raised against universities’ foreign-language requirement. At times, universities must defend themselves against doubts that “a one- or two-year language requirement with emphasis on basic skills even qualifies as liberal” (Sudermann 149). This claim rests on the assumption that basic language skills require too much rote learning and emphasize the ability to satisfy contingent wants. In contrast to basic language study, the argument goes, genuine liberal-arts subjects “call for ‘evocative’ modes of teaching featuring ‘inquiry and discovery’” (Sudermann 150).

“Inquiry and discovery” are apparently lacking in the satisfying-contingent-wants world of language study. Beginning language students can successfully ask for directions, but finding the local post office cannot provide insight into the human condition. As a result, critics conclude, language study does not liberalize the intellect like literature or philosophy can (Bugos 303). David P. Sudermann acknowledges critics’ point about language learners and satisfying contingent wants. Sudermann points out, however, that critics overlook an important point about language study and contingency. Specifically, Sudermann notes, language study forces students to confront their own contingency, and that confrontation can help students experience one of liberal education’s principal goals: the quest for self-understanding.

Sudermann argues that language students confront their own contingency in three different ways. First, they lose “the resources of [their] native culture” (154). In particular, by having their native language taken from them, students experience a profound sense of isolation. This experience helps them see how language and culture work together to create identity and organize the world. Second, students learn that without culture “the circumstances of existence—place, time, culture, forebears—also lack ultimate necessity” (155). Such recognition, Sudermann argues, should prompt students to wonder about the meaning of their own existence. Third, in addition to feeling isolated and adrift, students will confront the fact that thousands of cultures exist, “any one of which exists as a possible, though contingent, frame of reference” (155).

Once students face these three kinds of contingency, Sudermann concludes, they are in a proper state of mind for liberal education. By “voluntarily
abandoning what is known and secure for uncharted waters,” students can begin “devising ways to cope” (155). As they do so, language students will have begun the quest for self-understanding envisioned in liberal education.

While language students’ confrontation with contingency may offer a quest for self-understanding, translation and/or interpreting study offers a much greater opportunity to do so. The struggle to translate or interpret—to mediate between cultures—lays human sign systems bare. In effect, translation/interpreting students soon recognize that translation is essentially language referring to language. That recognition creates the intense confrontation with contingency that Sudermann describes. Such intensity justifies translation/interpreting study as liberal education.

III. Translation Competence: The Principal Outcome of Translation Education

Translation courses are not primarily designed to teach a foreign language, nor are they simple exercises in contrastive analysis. Instead, translation courses seek to help students develop translation competence. Such competence has long been recognized as a supercompetence that includes but is not limited to the four skills traditionally associated with learning a second language: reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Kiraly 14-15). This supercompetence requires a variety of linguistic, social, and professional abilities.

Translation competence has been the subject of much research during the past two decades. In 1995, Donald Kiraly published Pathways to Translation, a highly influential work about translator education. In that book, Kiraly decried the fact that translation curricula were not based on research about translation competence. Because translation studies was still a very young discipline at that time, this lack of researched-based curricula was not surprising. Nevertheless, Kiraly noted how then-current approaches actually discouraged students from developing the very skills they needed in the professional world. As one of the worst examples, Kiraly described performance magistrale, a translation teaching method common in Germany at the time. Performance magistrale is a classic transferist approach to education. The instructor chooses a text, often without explaining the reason behind the choice. Students bring their translated versions of the text to class. The professor then leads the students through the text, sentence-by-sentence. If the students’ translations differ from the professor’s, their translations are wrong. This approach, Kiraly argued, forced students to take a “passive role” in learning (19). By rendering students passive, performance magistrale prevented students from gaining the confidence and independence they would need as professionals.
Following the publication of Kiraly’s book, many researchers proposed definitions of translation competence. Three of the most influential definitions are those of Anthony Pym, Dorothy Kelly, and a Spain-based research cohort known as the PACTE group (Process in the Acquisition of Translation Competence and Evaluation). Pym proposes a two-part definition of translation competence as follows: (1) “the ability to generate a series of more than one viable target text (TT1, TT2 ... TTn) for a pertinent source text (ST)”; and (2) “the ability to select only one viable TT from this series, quickly and with justified confidence” (489). This rather minimalist definition indicates that translation competence is an intertextual competence. This intertextual competence requires the translator to identify the purpose and audience for a given target text.

While Pym’s minimalist approach is widely cited, it leaves much unsaid about the discrete skills that professional translators require. As a result, Pym’s definition is not especially helpful for developing translation curricula. For that reason, most scholars have defined translation competence as comprising a series of subcompetences. Catherine Way specifically links these subcompetence models to translation curricula: “Research into the different subcompetences is a vital tool in establishing specific objectives in translator training [...]” (91). This philosophy has fueled the PACTE group’s work on translation competence.

Broadly, PACTE defines translation competence as “the underlying knowledge system of the declarative and procedural knowledge needed to translate” (2008:106). Through a series of empirical studies, PACTE has sought to identify the subcompetences—the kinds of “declarative and procedural knowledge”—that comprise translation competence (2000:99-106; 2002:41-69; 2003:43-66; 2005:609-619; 2008:104-126). To date, PACTE has identified the following five subcompetences: (1) “bilingual subcompetence,” meaning knowledge of the languages and cultures involved in a given translation project; (2) “extralinguistic subcompetence,” which includes general knowledge about cultures and the world as well as specific knowledge about the source text’s topic; (3) “knowledge about translation subcompetence,” meaning an understanding of general translation strategies and how the translation profession works; (4) “instrumental subcompetence,” which concerns the ability to find and employ resources to aid the translation process; and (5) “strategic subcompetence,” which is the ability to resolve problems encountered in a specific translation project, produce a text that complies with expectations, and assess the translated text’s quality (PACTE 2008:106). This last subcompetence is an “essential” ability—a supercompetence—that “creates links between” the other four subcompetences (2008:107).
In addition to identifying five subcompetences, PACTE emphasizes the role of “psycho-physiological components” in translation competence. These psycho-physiological components shape each subcompetence. Such components include cognitive abilities like “memory,” attitudinal factors such as “intellectual curiosity” and “confidence in one’s own abilities,” and intellectual abilities such as “creativity” and “logical reasoning” (2008:107).

With two differences, Dorothy Kelly’s subcompetence model fits quite well with that of PACTE. Specifically, Kelly identifies linguistic, cultural, professional, and translation-related subcompetences that seem to differ little from PACTE’s five competences. But unlike PACTE, Kelly views psychological abilities—what she calls “psycho-physiological or attitudinal competence” (32) —as a subcompetence rather than as components that influence all other subcompetences. Most importantly, Kelly proposes “interpersonal competence” as a separate subcompetence. This subcompetence has no analog in the PACTE model. Kelly defines this interpersonal competence as a person’s capacity to “work with” people involved in a professional translation environment, whether they be clients, translation managers, or practitioners (32).

Table 1 below attempts to show the relative agreement between the PACTE and Kelly models. This table is modified from a table published by Daryl Hague, Alan Melby, and Wang Zheng in 2011.

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<td>• psycho-physiological components</td>
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Table 1: A comparison of two translation subcompetence models, modified from Hague, Melby, and Wang (249).
While one might quibble with the degree to which PACTE and Kelly overlap, even a cursory review of Table 1 indicates that translation competence goes far beyond simple bilingualism. Indeed, researchers clearly view translational competence as requiring, at minimum, “knowledge of the languages, knowledge of the cultures, and domain-specific knowledge” (Schäffner and Adab IX). Translational competence requires the ability to apply such knowledge to generate texts for specific audiences and purposes.

Translator-training manuals focus on helping students develop this text-generating ability. Manuals by Louise M. Haywood et al, Kelly Washbourne, and Sonia Colina suggest the kinds of classroom activities that successful translation instructors use. Among other things, these activities are designed to help students do the following: understand text types and conventions, improve reading comprehension, improve writing skills, resolve common translation problems (e.g., metaphors), conduct research, control terminology, anticipate the needs of particular audiences, educate clients, use computer-assisted translation tools, and understand the world of professional language services. All of these skills—as Table 1 indicates—contribute to students’ translational competence.

In addition to the foregoing kinds of learning activities, a successful translation course requires students to participate in group activities. Don Kiraly (2000), for example, has presented a compelling case for what he calls “social constructivist” learning, in which students work together to solve a problem. Following Kiraly’s lead, other researchers have developed clever collaborative activities. Among others, these include students conducting a real translation project for a client (Stewart, Orbán, and Kornelius) and students developing a terminology database (Austermühl). Such learning has the twin advantage of helping students develop interpersonal competence (as described above by Kelly) and participate in an activity that mirrors much of what happens today in the modern language industry.

While translation-specific courses and activities like those described above can help develop translation competence, successful translation programs do not limit their requirements to translation courses. Instead, they also require that students take language, literature, and culture classes. The expectation is that these courses will help students develop the linguistic and cultural subcompetences necessary for translation competence. In so doing, students should also gain the critical-thinking skills and experiential learning promoted in modern views of liberal education.
IV. “Humanities Plus” and the Spanish Translation Major at Brigham Young University

At Brigham Young University, the College of Humanities recognizes the value of traditional approaches to liberal education. At the same time, the college has sought to find ways to help students gain the experiential learning promoted by modern approaches to liberal education. To do so, the college has deliberately avoided creating so-called practical classes. Instead, it has implemented an initiative called Humanities Plus. Humanities Plus seeks to “provide ideas and resources for bridging the traditional humanities major to the professional work world” (College of Humanities, online). The “ideas and resources” include secondary majors, professionally relevant minors, the university honors program (which requires a research project), study abroad or field studies, faculty-mentored research, and internships (College of Humanities, online).

To promote the goals of Humanities Plus, the college publishes a monthly blog (College of Humanities, online). The blog reviews newspaper articles and professional publications that report how liberal-arts skills translate into careers. Recent articles, for example, describe the many business leaders who graduated with liberal-arts degrees. In addition to such articles, the blog includes information about internship and scholarship opportunities.

Humanities Plus does not simply provide information to students. Concerning internships, the college has a full-time student advisor whose principal responsibility is identifying internship opportunities and helping students meet internship providers. These providers appear on a regularly updated list available online. Furthermore, the college provides financial incentives to defray the costs of participating in internships. Currently, students can receive up to $500 for local internships, $1,000 for domestic (U.S.) internships, and $2,000 for international internships. Among others, these internships are available to Spanish-translation majors.

BYU’s Spanish translation major is the only translation major within the College of Humanities. The major’s aim is to provide professional formation that can help students enter the language-services industry. This industry is vast, offering opportunities for translators, interpreters, bilingual and monolingual editors, intercultural experts, project managers, website designers, and software engineers. While the major helps students prepare for these opportunities, the course requirements reflect a balance of professional training with courses usually associated with liberal education. The major requires a total of twelve courses at the junior and senior levels. Five of these courses are translation-specific—three general translation courses (beginning, intermediate, advanced), one computer-assisted translation tools course, and a capstone project. The other seven courses include a variety
of Spanish-related language, literature, culture, and linguistics topics. These seven provide opportunities to develop the broad knowledge sought in traditional liberal education, but the translation-specific courses do so as well. The advanced course, for example, emphasizes translation theory and textual analysis. Later, in the capstone class, students translate a long project of their choice. In that project, they include a textual analysis evaluating the source text’s audience and purpose. They provide a similar analysis for the translated text, but in addition they write an essay in which they use translation theory to explain both their translation choices and the consequences of not making alternative choices.

Translation graduates use their intellectual, creative, and intercultural abilities in a variety of fields. A substantial number, for example, seek professional training in law, medicine, or dentistry. Others opt for business school or accept employment with companies whose principal business has nothing to do with language services. Still others choose either language-related careers or master’s study (translation, interpretation, linguistics, literature). Regardless of the choice, translation majors receive sufficiently broad training to allow them to enter these fields.

Unfortunately, not every student is pleased with the liberal courses required for the translation major. Several years ago, a dissatisfied student submitted the longest “course evaluation” I have seen during seventeen years of teaching. I write “course evaluation” with quotation marks because her evaluation addressed the translation major as a whole. She decried the requirement of non-translation-specific courses, and she was especially upset about useless literature classes. Referring to her hopes to work in business, she asked: “What are they going to do? Ask me to analyze a poem?” This unhappy student’s question may bring a chagrined smile to a professor’s face, but her failure to understand the professor’s enthusiasm for liberal study is real. She simply could not see how the abilities she should have been gaining in school could transfer to settings outside school.

Humanities Plus did not exist when my unhappy student wrote her “course evaluation.” If it had, she might have had an opportunity to bridge the gap between schooling and the workforce. Since Humanities Plus appeared, translation students have successfully completed a variety of internships. These have included translation internships with private companies and interpreting internships in hospitals. The hospital internships have been especially successful, as Primary Children’s Medical Center—a large research hospital associated with the University of Utah’s medical school—has offered students sixty hours of instruction in addition to many hours of work experience. Other students have taken the opportunity to qualify as certified court interpreters before graduation. Still others have done creative mentored field study. The most impressive of these was that of a female student who
went to India shortly before graduating with a degree in translation. Her languages are English and Spanish, so India represented a true challenge for her. Her final report, in which she detailed how Indian interpreters negotiated cultural and professional norms, was an insightful (and delightful) application of theory to practice. Such an experience is precisely the kind of thing that Humanities Plus seeks to encourage.

V. Conclusion

Scholars and government leaders will likely never reach perfect agreement about the value and goals of liberal education. Indeed, we will almost certainly hear government leaders complain about students receiving “degrees to nowhere” from time to time, especially when public money for education is scarce. Those of us who celebrate the traditional view of liberal education, however, need not dismiss the “degrees to nowhere” crowd out of hand. As D. G. Mulcahy has argued, liberal education should be able to accommodate goals that go beyond intellectual development. Mulcahy’s solution – education for a person of “many-sided development” – envisions education that helps prepare people for work, recreation, and the practical demands of daily life. This solution reflects a convergence of modern scholars’ recommendations concerning the goals of liberal education.

Translation education fits well within the goals of liberal education, whether we accept traditional or modern views about what liberal education should be. Translation study itself forces students to confront their own contingency, just as traditional approaches to liberal education demand. In addition, translation competence requires the experiential and practical knowledge valued in Mulcahy’s modern model of liberal education. Such knowledge can grow through support like that provided by Humanities Plus.

Humanities Plus, an initiative promoted by Brigham Young University’s College of Humanities, represents one way in which universities can help students achieve the goals Mulcahy describes. Humanities Plus does not promote vocational classes. Rather, it provides resources to help liberal-arts students identify and apply their skills through internships and field studies. These opportunities are open to foreign-language majors, and BYU’s Spanish translation majors have made excellent use of them.

In the future, universities should consider adopting initiatives like Humanities Plus. We liberal-arts scholars have long argued that liberal education—the traditional kind—fosters intellectual development that will serve students well in both their personal and professional lives. The translation and interpretation internships offered through Humanities Plus give students an opportunity to catch a glimpse of just how that might look.
WORKS CITED


NOTES

1 Due to space constraints, the remainder of this paper will focus specifically on written translation.