Coming to Understand the World:

Translation, Interpretation, Teaching, and Learning

An Essay on Instructional Philosophy by Candace Elizabeth Uhlmeyer

Abstract: Because my educational background is broadly interdisciplinary and focused on diverse cultures, languages, and disciplines, my teaching philosophy centers on the translation process. But translation is not merely a linguistic necessity; it is foundational to the way human beings come to understand the world. Teaching is fundamentally an exercise in translation; it depends on co-operation and involvement between educator and learner, and makes possible the transformation of information into knowledge. Throughout my career I have endeavored to enrich my students' learning through innovative uses of traditional resources and the selective adoption of new media in order to facilitate broadly-based understanding of cultural information across human history.

. . . .

Aristotle defines metaphor simply: the giving of the name of one thing to something it is not. On the surface, then, a metaphor appears to be a kind of lie; but the etymology of the word leads us in another direction. If we look carefully at the Greek origins of the word *metaphero*, as well as of its Latin equivalent, *translatio*, we see that these words come from roots that mean "to carry over or beyond." Metaphor and translation, therefore, point to a process: the carrying over of meaning from one place to another. Human beings, in fact, come to understand the world through a *process* of seeing one thing in terms of another of explaining the unknown in terms of the known. And because metaphor exploits not only the similarities between things, but their differences as well, metaphorical thinking encourages nonlinear connections what we now call "lateral thinking." Teaching and learning, in this light, become co-processes in which learner and teacher explore what philosopher of science Gerald Holton calls "the cultural pool of metaphor," and expand it as they teach and learn.

What makes metaphor possible is common ground, and so the establishment of common ground becomes essential to understanding. If, for example, translators do not possess sufficient grasp of two languages, they cannot interpret effectively between those languages; they leave themselves open to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. The more fluent the translator, therefore, the more complete the translation.

Teaching and learning both involve the fundamental principles of translation: carrying meaning from one situation to another. The teacher, from within the common ground shared by the learner, attempts to transmit information that can be interpreted by the learner: that is, transformed into knowledge. In doing so, the teacher shares what he or she knows about the world (or of a particular aspect of the world), and the learner responds by interpreting the "package": specific information (facts, data) and the teacher's interpretation of that information (context, experience, understanding). Common ground, such as shared cultural experiences and shared language, makes all this possible. But the process includes another step, which lies at the root of why I teach. The teacher, in dialogue with the learner, herself becomes a learner. The differences between teacher and learner provide the space for new interpretations and for understanding.

The word "understanding" has become anathema in educational jargon because it is "too vague" and not "quantifiable." I cannot use the word in a syllabus or a learning objective because "to understand" is not an "action verb." But this stricture betrays a loss of understanding on the part of educators, as well as a loss of language. Again, etymology comes into play; if we take the word apart, we notice immediately that "to understand" implies something fundamental: *to stand under*. Understanding thus implies a foundation, a grounding, a place upon which further learning can be built. Thus, if we abandon understanding as a goal, we sidestep a basic reason for educating and becoming educated. While immediate quantification of how well students have retained facts or raw data can provide us with limited prognoses about their ultimate academic success, understanding itself cannot easily be measured precisely because it is not immediate; rather, it is ongoing, dialectical, and processual. Meaningful and significant forms of assessment must, therefore, *also* be ongoing, dialectical, and processual.

For these reasons, both my teaching and my learning are based on dialogue, translation, and interpretation. I am generally reluctant to give tests--not even "essay" tests (except in those cases where a particular body of information is necessary to build common ground); instead, every class I have ever taught has encouraged students to formulate their own questions, and then to seek ways in which to answer them. Instead of exams, I often require sets of questions which arise from whatever material I make available, and ask students to conduct research on topics they develop out of their own curiosity. Writing students must formulate questions and then essay into them: think critically about ideas, conduct research, and write as a way of working through the questions their research provokes. In lecture and discussions we begin from what we know from the common ground we share; I then provide them with new information and a perspective, and from there they proceed to assess the information and my perspective, to build on it through research, and ultimately to arrive at a perspective of their own. The ensuing discussion enhances not only their learning, but mine as well. The common ground, or playing field, expands. By putting my own views at risk of revision, I join in the game, and the process of learning of coming to understand continues.

The exams I have developed for my art history and humanities classes allow students to use their notes and carefully collected information drawn from readings and lectures. And because I do not use true/fase or multiple choice questions, students are required to make connections among different aspects of the material, and to come to conclusions based on evidence.

This is not to say that "anything goes," however. Along with information, I try to provide learners with the means to build the skills necessary to produce fair, cogent, meaningful interpretations. Critical thinking and writing thus become essential to understanding. There may never be one, definitive interpretation of any situation or text; but since limited experience can engender invalid interpretations, my role as teacher then requires me to facilitate further research, and to encourage the reconsideration and reassessment of evidence. And because some interpretations are better than others, students must establish criteria for evaluating competing interpretations.

Because the metaphorical process is so important to learning and understanding, I provide my students with information and material from as many media as I can gather. In addition to encountering important texts and images from the Western canon, writers begin to learn about basic arguments by discussing skits from *Monty Python's Flying Circus*; humanities students discuss different perspectives on archaeology by comparing Indiana Jones with modern working archaeologists, or come to understand the process of interpretation by translating bits of ancient plays into modern genres. Art and design history students explore the pervasiveness of classic images in popular culture, from advertising to *The Simpsons*. Research leads to encounters with books, periodicals, films, videos, digital media, and the internet. The explosion of electronic media in the last few years has both broadened and deepened the cultural pool of metaphor; but it has also necessitated new strategies for adjudicating between truly valuable information and absolute garbage. The challenge presented by imaginative learners who are open to all possibilities is formidable; how do I encourage their intellectual ardor and instill critical thinking skills (and healthy skepticism) without dampening their enthusiasm or risking intellectual cynicism?

The dialectical process I try to follow presents further challenges as well. How do I encourage the kind of academic rigor which fostered my own intellectual development, and at the same time make the material I teach accessible to a generation whose educational foundations differ widely from mine? How do I keep students interested in topics that may not seem "relevant" to them? How do I forge links between what I ask them to do in class and what they will be doing in life? I am constantly reminded that our children no longer read, that they grow up watching too much television, and yet they have limited knowledge of the world beyond our borders. How do I then promote curiosity about that world? How do I foster in my students the wonder that my teachers encouraged in me? Although these seem to be new questions, unique to 21st century America, the broader historical perspective provided by my own education tells me that they're not so new; educators have encountered similar problems throughout Western history, and have constantly been challenged to find new solutions. My reasons for wanting to teach in the first place lie in this very challenge.

An addendum: Although my pedagogical philosophy remains much the same as I articulated it above (sometime in 2001), today (in 2013) I find myself facing hurdles I did not anticipate earlier in my career. Today's students are increasingly bombarded with seductive technologies that sap their already-diminished attention spans. Teachers now compete not only with television and computer games, but with a dizzying

variety of electronic temptations: the internet, iPods, cell phones with features unimagined ten years ago, and social networking websites, all of which distract them not only from studying outside the classroom, but, increasingly, these devices intrude into the once sacrosanct precinct of the classroom itself. This burgeoning dependence on things electronic also means that less and less reading takes place, and a larger and larger amount of research is performed online (using sources whose reliability ranges from excellent to abysmal). My response to this problem has been to develop a website that scrutinizes sources and web-based material, makes course information available at all times, and tries to help students negotiate the confusing web of possibilities available to them.

I have steadfastly refused to join the Facebook cadre. Nevertheless, beginning in 2007, I entered the "blogosphere" rather enthusiastically. If nothing else, my four blogs (on political economy, museology, education, and a course-related effort to engage my students in current material) offer readers examples of how to "think on (virtual) paper." The blog posts generally consist of essays into topics in which I am particularly interested, and encourage response and dialogue. Whenever possible, I encourage students to begin blogs of their own as a way of transforming writing and thinking into components of their daily lives. Students are somewhat reluctant to comment to mine in print (they seem to suspect that I might be grading them on their grammar and syntax), but frequently engage me in class. It's clear from that interaction that at least some of the topics are interesting to them, so that blogs might well be used to enhance the dialectical process in ways that I had not foreseen when I began.

I have also made an effort to understand how online education might be used to engage students. I am currently taking a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) taught by archaeologists at Brown University, and have discovered that these venues offer a broad spectrum of possibilities. In future, I will be enrolling in more classes, and expect to mine them for ideas about how to teach more effectively in an increasingly digitally mediated culture.

Although those of us with some considerable experience of the world (i.e. older than most) find that recent crops of students produce significant challenges to tried and true methods, addressing frustrations and potential impasses can keep the experience of teaching and learning fresh, contemporary, and "in the moment." The best aspect of teaching that I can think of comes from the quest not only to instruct, but to learn in ever newer, more creative, and more intellectually invigorating ways.

Last reconsidered: July 2013