

Fusing and Defusing Horizons in Teaching and Translation

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In both “teaching” and “translating” we are “performing,” “reforming,” “participating,” “re-opening,” and “responding.” Chris Higgins and Nicholas Burbules’s repeated use of the present participle and gerund in their closing sentence suggests a movement that has started even before it is named, and that, in its present ongoing, eludes presence, even as it suggests a futural nonfinality. As diachronic, dialogic engagement and participation in a developing tradition, conceiving teaching as translation indeed highlights vital qualities of pedagogy and understanding.

Yet here I can identify with Glaucon’s response to Socrates in Plato’s *Republic*. There the subject is not translation but the related concept of intelligibility. When asked if he understands what Socrates means by the term “intelligible,” Glaucon answers: “I understand” but “not fully.”¹ Of course, the ambiguity in his comprehension and his ambivalence in declaring understanding lend support to Burbules and Higgins’ claim that partial understanding and a measure of misunderstanding are inevitable and structurally necessary. Indeed, the analogy’s ambiguity is what makes it suggestive in that it calls for considering and appreciating teaching and learning as a complex, even somewhat elusive matrix of dynamic temporal relationships between a text, its meaning in a new context, the process and product of its translation, the translator (teacher), and the reader (student) in a developing tradition.

I suggest, however, that the analogy’s ambiguity also evokes the need for further clarity of this polysemic term, translation, and for articulating its conjunctions and disjunctions with cognate concepts such as interpretation, criticism, performance, and enactment. How do these concepts both illuminate and depart from one another in their pedagogical suggestiveness? Finally, if teaching includes all of these hermeneutic, rhetorical, and performatory qualities, does foregrounding translation and the diachronic linguisticity of the teaching experience eclipse some of teaching’s vital qualities, even as it sheds light on others? The authors make the case well that Hans-Georg Gadamer’s universal hermeneutic diachronicity helps us understand teaching. But I still dare ask: Are there qualities of teaching that are lost in “translation”?

I suggest that the language and structure of Higgins and Burbules’s essay artfully model the gains and losses in the process they are describing. We can discern the beginning of this process in claiming that translation is “a good starting point” for talking about teaching. But the starting point of teaching-as-translation develops further as helpful qualifications and substitutions are introduced. Teachers bring a subject or text “to life for the audience for which they will perform it.” The teacher is an “interpreter,” a “critic,” and “and “a serious reader.” Though, to be sure, these roles are not inconsistent with that of translator, neither are they isomorphic. But again, this appears to be part of argument’s thrust: Translating is a process of

“participating in the ongoing development of a line of thought ... responding to a call that demands a response.” The authors respond to the demand as they develop (and somewhat change) the role of translator to stage director, to performer, to interpreter, to critic.

We should note that Gadamer acknowledges that in the translational diachronic development of a text or work of art, there is a “constant renunciation”² since “every translation is like a betrayal.”³ Translation, says Gadamer, involves an text’s “alienness and its conquest.”⁴ These are inevitable consequences of the “highlighting” effect of translation.⁵ And, in highlighting, there is a univocalizing of the manifold, a resolution of a work’s inherent, resonant ambiguity.

Of course, it is difficult to argue with the notion that teachers should help students find meaningful applications and understandings of the subjects being taught, just as it would be difficult to deny that, in translation as in teaching, “the rhetorical and hermeneutical aspects of human linguisticity completely interpenetrate each other,” to use Gadamer’s language.⁶ Yet, despite his compelling ontology, I still wonder if we should mourn the text even as its fecundity yields ever more translation. This question arises in considering the discussion on experiencing works of art. Following Gadamer, we could say that in a direct encounter with a work of art we achieve a singularly intensified vision of the unforeseen, the formerly invisible. And if indeed, as he claims, “one can find what it has to say only in it itself,”⁷ then, as we repeatedly, unrelentingly engage it anew, we would have to avoid replacing the work with a subsequent iteration.

In a different way, John Dewey echoes this need for direct encounter. Referring to the relationship between the work of art and the critic, Dewey maintains that the task of the critic is to “discover some unifying strand ... that is actually there and bring it forth with such clearness that the reader has a new clue and guide in his own experience.”⁸ So I ask, does the metaphor of translator sufficiently express the role of teacher-critic who provides “a new clue and guide” that serves the student’s “own experience”? In addition, Dewey cautions against criticism’s losing “the cultural milieu” that is “inside ... works of art as ... a genuine constituent” (*AE*, 315). This notion of an intrinsic, internal cultural quality that calls for “understanding of the object in its own qualities and relations” may be a departure from Gadamer’s ontology of art’s temporality (*AE*, 316). Though Dewey would also assert the importance of art’s engagement by an “external” milieu of the student, he would likely stop short of suggesting a complete Gadamerian “fusion of horizons.”⁹ And Dewey steers us clear of confusing the “distinctively esthetic” with “moral, philosophical, historical” categories as we interpret a work (*AE*, 317). The work of art should not be “treated as if it were a reediting of values already current in other fields of experience ... as artistic substance is not identical with theme” (*AE*, 17–18). Moreover, Dewey argues that “the moral function of art itself is to remove prejudice ... tear away the veils due to wont and custom, perfect the power to perceive” (*AE*, 325). Does the metaphor of translation, even in Gadamer’s helpful and suggestive diachronic ontology, sufficiently express what Dewey describes as the “critic’s office” to “tear away the veils”?

Dewey's theory of experience may also present a challenge by asking to what extent the metaphor of translation captures the qualities of learning experiences that transcend knowledge and cognitive understanding. Let's think about Dewey's caution against adopting a theory that "all experiencing is a mode of knowing, and that all subject-matter" become "refined objects."¹⁰ Prior to refining and transforming texts, artifacts, understandings, demonstrations, social interactions, introspective musings, or emotional responses, teachers would need to give students the opportunity to experience the enigmatic, even the seemingly inaccessible. These direct, qualitative, less mediated, dimensions of experience involve "being and having things in ways other than knowing them" and constitute the "preconditions of reflection and knowledge."¹¹ The question is if teaching as translation captures these qualitative dimensions of learning or if the analogy may unwittingly under-value "more primary connections."¹²

My final question concerns the extent to which there is a reciprocal alterity in the translational process. Does translation, as presented here, include the two-way interplay of languages or does it rather emphasize a more unidirectional continual temporal movement of one into another? Gadamer's notion of the dialogic and conversational qualities of translation are helpful in this regard, but I wonder if he goes far enough; does he call for a kind of "double alterity" of the text and of student?¹³ When can the student encounter the other, the foreign, in such a way that the teacher functions less as a translator who "fuses horizons" and more as a partner with the student in engaging alterity without the expectation of a complete "fusion"?

Notwithstanding these questions, Burbules and Higgins provide us with an insightful, useful analogy to teaching in the diachronicity of translational experience and understanding. There is much to be gained from conceiving of teaching as creating a meeting place in which the student encounters a developing, dynamic tradition. They offer a model that is productive rather than reproductive, pragmatic rather than dichotomous. Perhaps in doing so, they expose the risks and rewards of teachers choosing what and how to "translate."

1. Plato, *Republic* VI, 511a-c.

2. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen," as quoted in John Sallis, *On Translation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002), 72.

3. Gadamer, "Lesen ist wie Übersetzen," 279, as quoted in Sallis, *On Translation*, 104.

4. Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 365, as quoted in Sallis, *On Translation*, 103.

5. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 349; see Sallis's discussion of this point in *On Translation*, 72-73.

6. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "On the Scope and Function of Hermeneutical Reflection," in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), 25.

7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Die Aktualität des Schönen. Kunst als Spiel, Symbol und Fest," as quoted in Sallis, *On Translation*, 33 (emphasis added).

8. John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (New York: Minton, Balch, 1934), 314 (emphasis added). This work will be cited in the text as *AE* for all subsequent references.

9. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 271, as quoted in Sallis, *On Translation*, 103.

10. John Dewey, *Experience and Nature* (1925), 168.

11. Ibid., 18–19.

12. Ibid.

13. Günter Figal, “Seinserfahrung und Übersetzung,” 184, as quoted in Sallis, *On Translation*, 103.