



Re-thinking the box: Negotiating curricula and finding critical spaces in English

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Critical thinking is an important skill, necessary for upper-level university study, but is not always easy to introduce in lower-level units without detracting from other outcomes and teaching criteria. By manipulating existing curricula content and creating critical thinking exercises, in which students can use their own knowledge and skills, gained from the unit, to assess and reflect on unfamiliar materials, critical thinking skills can be developed. In this example, a class of English students responded positively to a comparative translation exercise, featuring unfamiliar texts but unit-related ideologies, in which they could apply taught information and critique the current unit outcomes. This style of critical exercise can potentially be extended to a broader range of disciplines, within and beyond the Humanities, to give lower-level students more chances to engage in higher order critical thinking and negotiate their curriculums at earlier stages in their studies. This would then facilitate student transitions from lower to upper-level study, exercising their critical and reflective skills, while not impinging on other important unit outcomes, or detracting from assessable content.

Introduction

Mal Leicester (2009) defines critical thinking as

... a tool box of skills which enables us to think more deeply, clearly and logically about what we believe and what we should do, and thus to make more valid judgments and decisions. Such thinking skills are personally and professionally important for the teacher to acquire and to develop in her or his pupils (p. xi).

Critical thinking is best demonstrated through the exercise of four “habits of thought,” including recognising dubious assumptions and generalisations, taking account of context, imagining alternatives, and developing reflective scepticism (Leicester, 2009). By creating activities, set within current curriculum outcomes and set materials, students are encouraged to expand their reasoning and analytical skills while still meeting and not infringing on time spent covering curriculum requirements.

Critical thinking is frequently cited as a graduate attribute in Australian universities, along with criteria such as ethical values, good communication skills, and lifelong learning. There has been a stronger push in recent years towards making such graduate attributes more readily teachable (Barrie, 2007). Problematically, it has been recognised that generic graduate attributes are often not part of usual university teaching practices (Hager and Holland, 2006). By creating critical thinking exercises that complement current unit structures, these exercises need not retract from current unit outcomes or outlines, but prepare students for upper-level study, and also incorporate critical thinking as an actively practicable graduate attribute.

Another way in which teachers can help students to engage with and critically assess their learning is through ‘negotiated curricula.’ Units with negotiated curricula are those towards which students have given their own input in terms of the material studied and the ways in which these are presented. Students’ personal and academic interests, emotional reactions to materials revealed, and their opinions on future students’ reactions are expressed. By combining critical thinking activities with negotiated curricula, teachers can offer students the chance to not only exercise and develop their

reasoning skills, but also to take an active, engaged approach in what is being taught. Students given the chance to contribute to and modify their respective educational programs are more likely to feel a sense of personal investment in the unit, as well as a more personal commitment (Boomer, 1992). In university English tutorials, students can negotiate their unit curriculum by commenting on how and why different set texts have been presented, and how these have impacted on their understanding of the unit's outcomes overall. By inviting these responses from students, teachers can encourage students to develop their critical abilities, reviewing not only what they are learning and how this is able to take place, but also how this could be improved.

Teachers can not only give students a chance to respond to curriculum materials, but can also invite a more egalitarian, communal atmosphere in the class, ideal for discussion and debate through implementation of a negotiated curriculum. Students who are given more chances to question their curricula, through the imposition of critical thinking exercises that operate *within* it, are being given the means to interact critically with material being taught, while still achieving its outcomes, paving the way for future studies and development of their logic and reasoning skills. This particular strategy is well suited for many humanities topics, in which the majority of classroom material is traditionally covered through direct vocal or written interactions.

Negotiated curriculum and critical thinking in English

An appropriate medium through which to introduce both negotiated curricula and critical thinking skills in English can be translation studies. By comparing and contrasting two English translations of the same original, non-English text, selected by the teacher or unit coordinator, students can apply their own knowledge, as well as skills learned in the course of the unit, to identify new problems and ideas. These can then be applied to the unit's key outcomes, and their relevance compared to that of texts prescribed by the current curriculum, offering opportunities for debate over the curriculum's structure and content, as well as exercising students' abilities to assess unfamiliar texts by critical thinking.

Translated texts are only infrequently acknowledged as secondary sources in a university English tutorial setting. The original voice of the writer has been incorporated and interpreted into the tone, stylistic preferences, values and editorial judgment of one, or many, translators, but students are still generally directed to consider only the values of the original writer, irrespective of whether these can truly be called authentic. Students are often exposed to or directed towards only one version of canonical translated texts, which can create problems when engaging in upper level study and coming across multiple, conflicting versions, as well as critical analyses that weigh the merits of different versions against one another. Arranging translations into hierarchies is a difficult procedure, governed by multiple, and often highly subjective criteria, including tone, language, imagery, meaning and structure. It would not be appropriate to demand students to make these analyses at such an early stage of study, but it would also be a mistake to withhold these translations from students' attention. By recognising the scope for additional interpretations at an earlier stage in English literary studies at university, students will be given the opportunity to structure more conscious readings of translated texts. Rather than suddenly being confronted with instability of meaning and the question of what makes a 'good' translation, students will be prepared to critically read translations not only as version of a canonical text, but also as products of the translator's own time and mind.

W. Powell Jones (1950) in her discussion on teaching translation, asserts that teachers

must choose whether we will introduce our students to the rich heritage of Western literature at second hand, or not at all. We cannot pass the buck to foreign language teachers, for they are specialists in one language, and even there so much of their energy is expended on the elementary phases of the language that there is little time left for critical study of literature (p 373).

Translations of classic, canonical works need not be studied only from a foreign language context. To do so would unreasonably exclude students that do not have the language skills, and also risk leading these students into unintentionally biased interpretations of translated texts. By comparing different

English translations of the same, non-English origin text, students can enrich their understanding of not only the source text, but also of the different people receiving and construing it in relation to their own values and beliefs, without having to learn ancient foreign languages. In observing subtle language and prosodic changes, students can recognise shifts in fashionable literary styles, and even outright censorship in particularly biased translations, sparking further questions on how many other texts, translated or not, that may have been subjected to the same treatment. This new angle would enhance their critical thinking skills, and also encourage students to critique existing English curricula in which comparisons of translations rarely feature.

Dennis Sumara and Rebecca Luce-Kapler (1996) recognise a pre-existing problem that the introduction of comparative translation studies in more university English courses could potentially address. They accept Roland Barthes' distinction between "readerly" and "writerly" experiences:

... writerly texts are those requiring greater-than-usual participation from the reader. As opposed to readerly texts, which attempt to provide a tightly woven set of experiences, writerly texts contain more spaces and gaps (Iser, 1978) for the reader to negotiate (Barthes 1974; Sumara and Luce-Kapler, p 71).

Sumara and Luce-Kapler (1996) caution that many teacher-education programs are geared towards exacting a readerly response from students, in which students risk viewing the text purely in an abstract sense, considering it to have little to do with their actual experiences in the world. By offering students two different versions of the same core text, without discriminating on the behalf of one or the other, the relative value of both translations becomes subject to students' varying perceptions of historical context, 'accuracy' and the appropriateness of writers using translation as a means of articulating their own grievances or beliefs at the expense of the original text.

Gerding-Salas (2000) observes that "every translation activity has one or more specific purposes and whichever they may be, the main aim of translation is to serve as a cross-cultural bilingual communication vehicle among peoples." It is this intersection between culture and language that should be examined by students in a university setting, recognising the potential for translations to be a vehicle for ideologies beyond those allegedly being preserved through modern adaptation, interpretation and translation. Since much literary analysis is geared towards extracting ideological implications from texts and aligning these with contextual motivations, such an exercise is not unrelated to ordinary processes of classroom work. Students may also find it of value to analyse the context of translators, and their status as writers in their own right, whilst also considering the roles of the original authors of texts. Popular recognition of these writers is still very much a work in progress, and there is room for a wealth of research to be undertaken in these areas. Students may find themselves drawn towards this area and seek to further their studies in upper level units and further research degrees. Rather than simply dismissing some works as 'bad' translations, these can be assessed as cultural products of their time, negotiating with conflicting beliefs and values, and attempting to reconcile these in such a way that the text can also be marketed to a contemporary audience.

Case study: Creating a critical thinking exercise

The following case study focused on identifying student willingness and interest in participating in a critical thinking exercise, with the option to negotiate the unit's curriculum. At this stage, whether or not students found the exercise relevant to their learning was of importance, since at its theoretical core, this was an exercise aimed towards giving students more room in which to analyse how and what they learn. Recommendations for amendments to this exercise and suggestions for ways in which to make it more approachable to a wider range of students were also sought.

This paper outlines a case study where, in the context of an English university unit, it was possible to introduce students to new texts, not on the current curriculum, ultimately showing students how to apply knowledge that they have gained in the course of completing the unit to unfamiliar materials. It demonstrates that teachers can create short exercises, containing extracts from unknown texts, and

brief questions asking students to ‘decode’ these, with reference to their understanding of unit materials and ideas as a whole, as well as their personal belief in the new material’s relevance to study. These exercises, taking no more than ten minutes to complete, then essentially create ‘new’ critical spaces from which negotiation of the curriculum can take place, while still exercising skills assessed by it. The critical thinking exercise created for this case study demonstrates how unfamiliar, translated English texts can be used to support students’ understandings of current unit outcomes and ideas, while giving students space to analyse new texts, reconcile these with their own knowledge, and then critically assess these with regards to unit materials, and their value as teaching items.

A short critical thinking exercise was developed, which allowed students to demonstrate not only their critical thinking skills, but also their willingness to negotiate and engage with their current unit curriculum. In addition, analysis of these results reflected:

- willingness of students to critically engage with unfamiliar texts
- willingness of students to critique the current curriculum content.

These were achieved through asking second and third-year undergraduate students of English, studying the unit *Victorian Ideologies*, to participate in an exercise containing two questions. One question tested students’ ability to synthesise their understanding of the unit with the new material presented in front of them, and the other question asked directly for their impressions of this material, its relevance to their unit, and whether or not they believed that future students of *Victorian Ideologies* would gain any benefit from studying these translations.

Description of the critical thinking exercise

The project involved drawing up a worksheet, comprising of two questions and two translations of the same poem. Poems were chosen on the basis that they are short, ‘complete’ texts, which students could quickly read and analyse. The poems chosen were both English translations of ancient Greek poet Sappho’s *Ode to Aphrodite*, written by Willis Barnstone in 2006 and Edwin Arnold in 1869. Both poems were remarkably different in content, structure and language, due largely to their authors’ mixed responses to Sappho’s protestations of lesbian sexual desire, self-deification and intense emotional suffering. Whereas Barnstone’s poem was relatively matter-of-fact about all of these aspects, Arnold’s translation heterosexualised and diminished Sappho’s enunciation of desire to a more plaintive outpouring, shifting from an outraged tirade to a more worshipful tone. Importantly, both translations were relatively short and presented on the same page, giving students the chance to compare both visually as well as in terms of their content, which had some ideological connections with their Victorian unit and its explorations of religion, gender and class values.

A group of twenty-six students volunteered to attempt the exercise. They were provided a brief, three-minute synopsis of issues inherent in translating texts, and the potential for later writers to include their own values and beliefs in place of those actually expressed by the original writer being translated. I also made sure to mention some brief details about legends of Sappho’s life and beliefs, including her worship of Aphrodite and apparent sexual appetites. The students had never heard of the poems or writers before, nor had they undertaken any translation studies previously. Some students were studying European languages at university, but had not engaged in any form of creative translation theory analysis. After the short briefing, the students were then given between five and ten minutes to respond to the questions, and all answers were submitted anonymously.

They worked individually and in silence, but were invited to ask questions at any point should they feel confused. The exercise was anonymous and undertaken voluntarily on the students’ part.

Results and discussion

The first question asked students to compare the two poems, identify differences between these, and to explain them with reference to what knowledge they had of Victorian ideologies and values. Twenty-one out of the twenty-six students responded in considerable detail, writing several sentences of

analysis or even filling the entire allotted space. Only five students wrote brief dot-points, or two or fewer sentences. In this case then, the poems chosen were appropriate to the unit and readily compared with knowledge that the students had already committed to memory, suggesting viability between this exercise and the current format of the unit, without need for additional texts or ideologies to be covered. I assessed the quality of these responses to be very fair, considering the unfamiliar nature of this exercise, as almost all students recognised a range of issues conveyed in the Victorian translation that were not reflected in the more modern version. Issues of gender and religion featured prominently in student comments.

The second question asked the students to give their personal opinion on the applicability of this exercise to the current unit, their enjoyment of the experience, and whether or not they felt that other students would find the exercise valuable. This question specifically targeted students' ability and willingness to assess the exercise's constructive alignment with the unit outcomes. This question is the core part of the exercise, since it actively sought a negotiation of the current unit curriculum, and an evaluation of this use of critical thinking as a means of understanding unfamiliar texts in relation to established unit outcomes. Twenty-five of twenty-six responded with varying levels of enthusiasm for the introduction of some form of translation studies to the unit *Victorian Ideologies*. Student feedback was, for the most part, extremely positive, with students reasoning that such studies appear to be "a valuable exercise especially when you consider the historical context and social or moral motivations of the translator." Students also reported emotional responses to the activity, one student commenting "it seems interesting and upsetting at the same time, it may be good to compare it to some modern censorship." Other descriptions employed by students included "easier and more relevant," "broadens insight," "valuable," "a fresh perspective," "useful," "interesting and quite productive" and "a good addition." Some students remarked that this kind of analysis "offers stark comparisons for better understanding into how the Victorians saw themselves against others." Only one student outright dismissed the exercise as irrelevant, and one other saw the value of the exercise, but cautioned that it could be a bit difficult to understand.

Table 1 provides some of the most direct and opinionated feedback offered by students. Comments omitted from the table repeated what other students had already covered.

These results are extremely promising, but since only a small group undertook this exercise, more feedback would be ideal. At this stage, there appears to be a very accepting attitude on the part of students towards the idea of comparing and contrasting translations of the same text, in order to develop further ideas about context and the role of the translator. Two students out of twenty-six were not convinced by the exercise, voicing concerns about clarity and obvious connections to the unit, which suggests that more introductory work should be undertaken before using the exercise. These responses indicate that there is willingness among a majority of students in this case study to exercise their critical thinking skills, in completing the first part of the exercise, and also in negotiating the curriculum by commenting on the relevance of this exercise's material as a future learning resource. It is this level of interest that is most helpful, since it motivates future development in this area.

Some potential developments to this exercise can be identified in student responses; for example, the three-minute lecture delivered on the exercise is, unsurprisingly, not enough. A more thorough introduction, engaging with creative translation theory as well as the historical contexts of the translators to be examined, would be an appropriate amendment. A discussion session with students immediately before and after the exercise would also improve struggling students' understandings of the purpose behind the activity and its connections to the unit outcomes. In addition, a discussion session would give students the chance to share their critical thinking among one another, generating more ideas and allowing students to debate the relative value of new material in comparison to their current unit outline, in an interactive form of negotiated curriculum.

Table 1: Sample student responses to question two

Student	Relevant comments
1	... it is a valuable exercise especially when you consider the historical context and social or moral motivations of the translator ...
2	... it seems interesting and upsetting at the same time, it may be good to compare it to some modern censorship ...
3	... It would allow us to use exactly what parts are specifically Victorian ideologies. It is always easier and more relevant to have a reference point and something to compare and contrast ...
4	...it shows how texts can be manipulated in order to fit within the society's idealist conventions ...
5	... broadens insight ...
6	... I think the idea of comparing translations could prove valuable in providing a sense of the changes in (a) literary focus, (b) language usage, (c) social interplays ...
7	... Definitely a new tract of analysis that would be a fresh perspective. Also a useful way to view the practice of translation ...
8	... It would be interesting and quite productive in classes, as most would come up with different ideas and everyone would have something to say, which makes for better discussion
9	... I definitely think that this would be a good addition because it highlights the extent of these Victorian ideologies, and how deeply engrained they were ...
10	Yes!! This would be interesting, as it is almost a form of Victorian censorship. It really highlights cross-cultural differences and emphasises the concerns of the Victorians!
11	... Maybe something more to do with/associated with religion and science rather than gender ...
12	... I would greatly enjoy the translations section added to the unit, I think it would help with the understandings of the Victorian ideologies ...
13	I think that this would be an excellent idea. This kind of analysis offers stark comparisons for better understanding into how the Victorians saw themselves against others. I think it would be more useful than solely Victorian poetry, which can be confusing at times
14	Definitely. Yes, we haven't had the opportunity to compare explicitly the process of translation and the insights this might provide into Victorian society
15	Comparing translations would enable students to discover more about Victorians ... it would be a very good addition to the current unit
16	... It could be a bit difficult to understand, though ...

Conclusions

It is possible, despite time constraints and the realities of crammed curricula, to give students room to expand their critical thinking skills while still successfully teaching all necessary unit outcomes. By creating short, critical exercises that expand on students' skills, derived from existing unit outcomes, teachers offer students further opportunities to develop their critical thinking skills, scaffolding students' reasoning processes in preparation for upper-year study. While it is true that critical thinking can be difficult to practice in a classroom setting, due to limited time frames and the sheer volume of material that must be taught, these skills can be integrated into existing unit structures via designing

unit-related critical exercises, that expose students to unfamiliar material, but call for application of skills already learnt. The transition from lower to higher-level thinking can catch some students by surprise, and in order to minimise this, teachers can incorporate more sophisticated thinking processes into existing class frameworks. Their immediate gains, at the same time, include opportunity for more active student engagement with class materials and discussions, particularly in the setting of English studies, and active engagement with a popular graduate attribute, critical thinking. By introducing students to and familiarising them with critical thinking at an earlier stage in their university studies, students will undergo a scaffolding process that will support them through their future, higher-level studies. Scaffolding need not detract from the original outcomes and assessable content of lower-level units. It can manipulate existing materials and ideas within the curricula, effectively meeting curricula criteria while still giving students the chance to express individual understandings of the unit and reconcile these with their own knowledge and reasoning.

At the same time, by combining these critical thinking activities with negotiated curricula, teachers offer students the chance to not only exercise and develop their reasoning skills, but also to take an active, engaged approach in what is being taught. Students given the chance to contribute to and modify their respective educational programs are more likely to feel a sense of personal investment in and ownership of the unit, as well as a more personal commitment (Boomer, 1992). The level of independence and confidence that this offers can not only motivate greater involvement on the students' part, but can inspire discussion and creative, critical thinking in English tutorial settings. Other disciplines may also benefit from giving students freedom to 'push' the boundaries of their curricula, questioning not only why ideas or materials are being taught, but also fine-tuning their analytical abilities by contrasting knowledge being taught with knowledge already acquired. Discrepancies between these then offer room for future study and debate, and may even spark student interest in pursuing postgraduate studies.

In this case study, students' responses to the exercise indicate that while there was some initial confusion, due to their lack of familiarity with such a way of looking at texts, there was a lot of positive feeling towards the process. A majority of students found it easy to reconcile the translations with their knowledge of twenty-first century and eighteenth-century values, using critical thinking skills with confidence. Many were amazed at the discrepancy between the two translations, and were keen to reflect on why they thought that such changes had taken place, connecting in particular to Victorian views on women's rights to speech, homosexuality, and Christian faith. In this sense then, student comments revealed keenness to express their own opinions and negotiate the curriculum, actively analysing and ranking the relevance of the translated materials with texts already studied. Their interest and enthusiasm, evident in their comments, indicates that this is an exercise worth further development and adaptation to suit other fields.

It was important however, to ensure that students did have a foundation in the contextual locations of both translators from which to work, as well as a cursory knowledge of the processes of analysing poetry. This is an activity intended to support higher order thinking, offering students support in the form of an original basis in ideas with which they were already familiar, and then asking them to extend this, using their own analytical abilities, to deal with unfamiliar texts. Even though none of the students had heard of either writer, or even Sappho, they were still able to engage with them on a very pleasing level due to the inclusion of a brief introductory statement that reflected this original basis. The warmth of their reception and professed interest in taking a more 'hands on' approach in examining two short translations of the same poem suggests the potential for further development and later use of this exercise as a teaching tool in English studies.

What emerges from this project is recognition of potential for inclusion of critical thinking and negotiated curriculum exercises within an existing unit framework. Since the example in this project is English-specific, modifications are likely to be needed for units outside Humanities, but the critical opportunities demonstrated in this case study may be of similar value to students from other disciplines. The chance to apply students' knowledge to broader contexts, with a particular focus on unit outcomes and materials, supports lower-level students in their transition to upper-level styles of

thinking and critical requirements. This is a model that can potentially be modified for other disciplines to benefit a broader range of students at lower levels of study.

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