
FREE KNOWLEDGE AND THE ‘ART OF ETHICAL MAINTENANCE’: RISKS AND CHALLENGES TO INTERPRETER EDUCATION / EL CONOCIMIENTO LIBRE Y EL “ARTE DEL MANTENIMIENTO ÉTICO”: RIESGOS Y RETOS PARA LA FORMACIÓN DE INTÉRPRETES

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Abstract: In Interpreting Studies, our collective intelligence has been transformed by tools and values borrowed from cyberculture and used by professionals and teachers alike. Pierre Lévy’s (1997) notion that the prosperity of a country, corporation or person depends upon their ability to optimally manage knowledge has also become a dominant paradigm in the anthropological space shared by scholars. In record time, we have progressed from the motorcycle to the spaceship. ‘Collaborative work’ in the cloud has become commonplace among students and lecturers. In Interpreting Studies and Education, the use of free and/or open courseware has allowed for our collective IQ to evolve and our shared noosphere to expand dramatically in recent years, but not without consequences. The arrival of collective tools, methodologies and frameworks entails novel epistemological risks that may challenge scholars’ hitherto common practices. This paper will explore these risks and consequences from the viewpoint of the ethical issues that arise when implementing values such as those of the Open Learning Model (Himanen et al., 2001) in day-to-day interpreter education. The construction of ethical values as collective knowledge in a class, a university department or School is an exercise in critical thought *per se*. It entails a reflective, self-critical effort on the part of the actors involved in order to keep ahead of the times, not just technically but, most importantly, with regard to meta-ethics, an exercise essential to what one could call the ‘art of ethical maintenance’.

Keywords: Interpreting; Ethics; Free knowledge; Didactics.

Resumen: Nuestra inteligencia colectiva se ha transformado gracias a los valores y herramientas procedentes de la cibercultura utilizados tanto por profesionales como docentes del ámbito de la Interpretación. Ideas como las de Pierre Lévy (1997), según las cuales la prosperidad de cualquier país, corporación o persona depende de su habilidad para gestionar el conocimiento, se han convertido en un paradigma dominante en el espacio antropológico compartido por los académicos. En tiempo récord hemos progresado de la motocicleta a la nave espacial. Ya es muy común que estudiantes y profesores trabajen de forma colaborativa en la nube. En los Estudios de Interpretación, así como en Didáctica, el uso de cursos y herramientas libres, o abiertos, ha permitido que en los últimos años el “coeficiente intelectual colectivo” de nuestra disciplina evolucione y que la noosfera común se expanda de forma drástica, no sin consecuencias. La adopción de metodologías, marcos educativos y herramientas colectivas conlleva nuevos riesgos epistemológicos que podrían suponer un desafío para las prácticas docentes más utilizadas hasta ahora. En este artículo se explorarán estos riesgos y consecuencias desde el punto de vista de las cuestiones éticas que emanan a la hora de implementar valores tales como los del Modelo de Conocimiento Abierto (Himanen et al., 2001) en el día a día de la formación de intérpretes. La construcción de valores éticos para el conocimiento colectivo en una clase, Departamento o Facultad constituye de por sí un ejercicio de pensamiento crítico. Supone un esfuerzo reflexivo y autocrítico por parte de los actores implicados para poder mantenerse al día, no sólo en lo que

respecta a la tecnología sino, lo que es más importante, en lo que concierne a la metaética; un ejercicio esencial para lo que podría llamarse, el “arte del mantenimiento ético”.

Palabras clave: Interpretación; Ética; Conocimiento libre; Didáctica.

1. Introduction

1.1. Free Knowledge in interpreter training: we are not alone (in the booth)

As professionals who transmit information for a living, the worldview of translators and interpreters has progressed, in record time, from the motorcycle to the spaceship. Pierre Lévy's (1997) notion that the prosperity of a country, corporation or person depends upon their ability to optimally manage knowledge has also become a dominant paradigm in the anthropological space shared by scholars and university lecturers in general.

In Interpreting Studies, our collective intelligence has been transformed not only by new tools such as Moodle or livestreaming, but most importantly by the values borrowed from cyberculture and used by professionals and teachers alike. In teaching and learning, translation and interpreting ‘in the cloud’ has become commonplace, as is ‘collaborative work’ among students and lecturers.

The concept of ‘free knowledge’ (free as in free speech, not as in free beer, as defined by the Free Software Foundation¹) may provide lecturers in translation and interpreting with a theoretical framework with which to explain the inextricable link between the use of technical tools and the enriching values of state-of-the-art methodologies in education. Thus, the use of free and/or open courseware has allowed for our collective IQ (in Interpreting Studies and in the transversal discipline of Education), to evolve and our shared noosphere to expand dramatically in the last twenty years, but not without consequences; the arrival of collective tools, methodologies and frameworks entails novel epistemological risks that may challenge scholars’ hitherto common practices, as we will see below.

1.2. The Open Learning Model and its values

The Open Learning Model (Himanen et al., 2001: 73) takes the values of concepts such as free software and free knowledge to the field of education, as does the Open Access project in academic publishing. Both these models are based upon the premise that sharing knowledge (be it teaching materials or scholarly articles) helps humanity advance and improves research. In a more localised manner, the Open Learning Model can be used in an interpreting classroom in every stage of the interpreting task simulation, constructing knowledge in a critical manner.

The Open Learning Model, also known as open academic model, or Net Academy, is an ethical approach to teaching and knowledge-sharing in that it encourages principles such as student empowerment, critical dialogue and non-hierarchical effectiveness in the educational environment. Its wider contribution to existing proposals is that the ‘learning environment’ refers not only to FLOSS (free, libre and open-source) software or materials but also to the development of its learning philosophy and structures. This model encompasses sharing learning materials and knowledge, as well as the manner in which educational institutions are structured.

¹ See complete definition from the Free Software Institute (2015) at: freeknowledge.eu/definitions/freesoftware.

Universities, and academics within them, tend to reproduce the hierarchy and learning models of a monastic school, applying a teacher-oriented model. Thus, even when they go virtual (such as in some Open CourseWare platforms which are very often teacher-oriented), courses and schools are governed hierarchically. In contrast, Himanen et al. (2001) fundamentally defined the Open Learning Model as “a continuously evolving learning environment created by the learners themselves”, organised in the same way as the development of new software, which is one of the main reasons for its practical success. The development of such platforms (eg. Moodle throughout the academic world, or Wikipedia) constitutes the pillars of this ethical approach to teaching and learning, the lack of which Himanen had seen as a challenge in 2001 (Ibíd.:73).

Himanen also refers, unselectively, to the Open Learning Model as the Open Model or the Hacker Learning Model, “in which all study materials would be free for use, critique, and development by everyone”. Thus, existing materials would be continuously improved in new ways for the benefit of the community (Ibíd.: 77). The original hackers² believed in what they call a learner-oriented, scientific and research-based model.

Much like Plato's Academy, students were not supposed to be inculcated pre-established knowledge; they were “companions in learning”, strengthening the students’ “ability to pose problems, develop lines of thought, and present criticism” (Himanen et al., 2001: 76). According to Himanen, scientists who choose the open academic model have done so perhaps for ethical reasons, but mainly because scientific knowledge and information are most successfully created in an environment where researchers are motivated.

2. Open Learning... in a closed booth?

It goes without saying that professional translators and interpreters are especially open to learning about any subject, discipline or culture, if only because they have to transmit information from one language to another. They are, by definition, ‘open’ to receiving and searching for knowledge of all sorts. Despite this penchant for openness, paradoxically, in traditional Interpreting Studies, the (obsolete) focus on practice has served as an excuse to ignore theoretical approaches to our own profession, positing the primacy of practice over theory, ignoring modern approaches whereby theory and practice are structurally intertwined.

The teaching of theoretical knowledge has always been part of the traditional universalist education in Translation Studies: translation, first as equivalence, and then serving specific functions (*skopos*) has given place to a cultural turn and to paradigms based on negotiation and intercultural mediation. Yet in Interpreting, the false theory/practice dichotomy is still a teaching reality in many schools, even after the changes brought about by the Bologna process in European Higher Education, with the creation of professionalising postgraduate courses in interpreting.

When it comes to the use of “theory”, the teaching of interpreting has gone through different phases: from the merely practical approach of the 1950s, to the later drastic division in the 80s between theory and practice, and the inclusion of theory as a way to generalise principles of the acquisition of practical skills in the 1990s. Still, well into the 21st century, theory is thought of mainly as conclusions drawn from examples in speeches or exercises used in class. It is thus a common misunderstanding to confuse the joint use of theory and practice with the complete disappearance of the former. In many cases, what some misleadingly call “theory” is completely absent from the curriculum in interpreting subjects,

²For the conceptual difference between a hacker and a cracker, see Lambert (2005: 36). URL: goo.gl/VCHF7j.

as is the reading of articles or books chapters of growing difficulty for a coherent acquisition of theoretical concepts while acquiring interpreting techniques through practice (Pöchlacker, 2010).

This translates into a regression to the 1970s, partly due to the misinterpretation of the need to join theory and practice, by ignoring theoretical knowledge, or simply making theoretical generalisations from one example.

I hope to dispel throughout this paper the argumentative fallacy that trainee interpreters should only develop their *practical* skills; the radical division between theory and practice has been out of fashion for decades (see, for example, Carr and Kemmis, 1986: 113). In translation, teaching and learning constructivists such as Kiraly (2000) have long changed the perception of theory in our field, opting for a hybrid classroom which belongs to a community (that of translators and interpreters), but in fact implemented by another: the academic community. In interpreting, Pöchlacker (2009, 2010) and Gile (2010) have tirelessly defended the need on the part of trainees to receive a basic theoretical education in order to improve their practice.

Starting with the basic epistemological false dichotomy confronting theory and practice (which unfortunately, depending on the background of the students, can be nearly impossible to dispel), many ethical issues arise when attempting to implement values such as those of the Open Learning Model in the interpreting lab.

In what follows, we will look at the risks, consequences and challenges encountered when implementing the values of this Model from the viewpoint of the ethical issues that arise in day-to-day interpreter education.

3. Going ethical

At every instance, the lecturer has to choose what to include or omit in a given class, and it is those choices which mark not just the ideological stances of the students, but also that of the teaching and learning environment and institutions. The examples we give, our teaching methodology and the worldviews we include, or the way we organise the curriculum, bear on our training practices and therefore on our students' experience (Calzada, 2007; Martinez, 2010). Even if interpreting lecturers decide not to include controversial issues in the speeches used in class, the choice is still a political one. Whether a lecturer is teaching history, sciences or translation, however careful s/he may be, it is not humanly possible to avoid political or ideological stances in the discourse presented to the students, if only because the choice of teaching materials is already an ethical one. Lecturers are, of course, free to decide not to include Ethics in the syllabus, or even to believe that it should not be included; nevertheless, a collective ethos will always exist in the class and it is up to them to attempt to develop it or not.

Eisner (2002), distinguished between the 'explicit', 'implicit' and the 'null' (absent) curriculum in educational institutions. Indeed, from the wider perspective of curriculum studies, the role of research and ethics in the interpreting curriculum could often be considered as absent. When Ethics is not explicitly included in the curriculum, there are several ways in which one can treat ethical issues at least in an implicit manner, as we will see below.

From externalist research in business ethics to psychological experiments to how ethical behaviour and empathy are learnt in a multicultural environment, or the acquisition of interpersonal skills and teamwork, many studies offer a rich interdisciplinary framework which could help develop tools for the improvement of ethical education and motivation in translators and interpreters. Studies on the ethics of didactics have been applied to all

disciplines and professions; the newly-created translation and interpreting community is far from being an exception in this respect. Deontology has been traditionally explained in interpreter education for worthy causes such as fighting against dumping, improving work conditions, or deploring specific methods within the exercise of the profession. It has, however, until recently, gone without a conscious effort to accept that professional practice is influenced by the translator's ideology, not to mention the speaker's, or the lecturer's —see, for instance, Hermans (1996); Hatim and Mason (1990) or Diriker (2004)—, addressed as a vertical transmission of a list of solutions (see Pöchhacker, 2004: 164 and 2006: 207).

Teaching ethics to future interpreters without telling them what to do in a prescriptive manner requires a lot self-discipline on the part of the lecturer. A translator, an interpreter, a teacher, like any other citizen, has rights and obligations: some are defined by law, others are of an ethical nature (Himanen et al., 2001: 69). Conforming to social “musts” and “oughts” and having rules is of essence in any profession, as is teaching them, yet the risks of a prescriptive, solely deontological education are still present in every profession and culture. The gap between fact and value that Hume³ cautioned against is known as Hume's Guillotine and has become central in the theory of ethics: people make assumptions about what should be done (prescriptive statements) based on facts about what is (descriptive statements). Hume called for caution against such inferences. Unfortunately, this is only one of many ever-present logical fallacies, still found not only when we speak about morality but also in people's everyday lives, including politics, the media and professional life.

As things stand in interpreting studies, the lecturer chooses both ‘what is’ and ‘what must be done’ when it comes to the study of ethical quandaries in the class. The discipline of Applied Ethics, on the one hand, comes unavoidably into the picture when we ask ourselves how to teach moral rules and, most importantly, how to choose or draft them. On the other hand, how can legal or deontological frameworks help interpreters make difficult decisions? How can a lecturer convey this important message to a class? Perhaps the least conflictive way for a lecturer to facilitate critical dialogue at a basic level is to ask the students only about one text or speech that has been translated or interpreted, looking at the ethical choices they themselves took. Then, taking it to a second level, students could be asked to reflect upon ethical issues in the profession based on that same translation or interpreting task.

Yet, how can ethics can be taught in an environment such as academia, where ethical quandaries abound as often as in the professional market? One can encourage critical thought about a given subject taught by the lecturer, in the form of anonymous suggestions and feedback about the ethical approach in the teaching and learning process. This can be done constructively by providing a well-researched questionnaire focusing, first, on what students like about the teacher's ethical approach, and second, on what can be improved and how. By guiding the reflection upon moral stances applied to one of the subjects the students take, the lecturer will be providing a preliminary framework for the student's own and personal construction of an ethical perspective about the institutional context where the teaching and learning takes place. It could be perhaps of interest to see in further research if awareness of the third level of meta-ethics in a teaching and learning context affects motivation, and if so, in what way and to what extent.

Another way to introduce Ethics in the classroom is to explore the advantages, possibilities, risks and challenges of motivating the students through volunteer work, together with potential uses and misuses of the promotion of humanitarian activities. This can help the lecturer to start critically encouraging students to reflect upon ethical decisions not as being simply ‘good’ or ‘bad’, but as being part of a myriad of human interactions, interests and

³Cohon, R. 2010. “Hume's Moral Philosophy”. Edward N. Zalta (ed.) *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2010 Edition). Available at: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hume-moral/#io>.

mutual expectations where endless other stakes are at play. In this manner, interpreters, among other local and international actors, may reflect how they can contribute to social justice in their environment.

Finally, students may be asked what they would do if they were a translation lecturer trying to explain to their students the relationship between ethics and ideology in translation, or to make them think about the difference between ethics and deontology. Empathy, courtesy, the treatment of emotions in competitive settings, self-esteem, mobbing (Laygues, 2001: 169) and conflict resolution in academia are additional concepts which could arguably deserve further analysis for the improvement of our collective ethos.

3. Conclusions

In order to apply any existing methodology in the interpreting lab, be it the Open Learning Model, or any other, lecturers must first dispel the belief that interpreting is only a practical trade where the role of theory is superfluous. History has repeatedly shown that it is risky for moral beings to ignore meta-ethics and only follow prescriptive moral rules; ideology may sometimes inspire thought about ethics, but it can as easily liquidate moral considerations. Universities are still on time to restore that long-lost “enlightened community” that some claim existed at some point (Hortal, 1994).

Unlike in the 1920s, it is now widely accepted that there is much more to education than trying to draw the best out of a child (Romesh and Sharma, 1998) and that giving future professionals adequate tools to confront real life will make them better translators and interpreters. Members of academia, as the environment for the highest possible level of learning and teaching, could have the responsibility to address the omission of Ethics in the curriculum.

Respect for fundamental rights, personal liberties and autonomy could hopefully be some of the smallest common denominators of our collective ethos in the Translation Studies community. Defining such values in a professional community as culturally diverse as ours may prove less daunting than one might think, especially due to its variety and the roles of its members as intercultural mediators who are used to understanding otherness. Access to distance training has evolved, and the social impact of teaching methodologies such as critical pedagogy (Kantol, 1999) or social constructivism (Király, 2000), influenced by certain ethical or ideological positions (Freire, 1970) is now more widespread. This may help us understand critical ways of approaching ethics in the interpreting class: what does a lecturer gain from promoting certain values in the classroom and not others? What are the advantages and disadvantages for the students? And, especially, what does society gain from this ethical awareness?

In the same way as doctors or computer engineers are sometimes compelled to work for NGOs or for free in times of need, teaching ethical professional behaviours is essential in the education of translators and interpreters. In the spirit of the Hacker Ethic, translators and interpreters’ work could become more free if taught to use not only the latest technology but also the ethical background that comes with it.

Arguably, human beings, as unfinished beings open to development and self-improvement, do wish to reach the individual plenitude portrayed by the study of Ethics. When exploring the basis needed to start shaping moral aspects in any given profession, the study of ethics offers a collective ideal of coexistence and social justice. Furthermore, the sense of cohesiveness of a given community, and even its identity, may depend partly on whether its members are allowed to participate in the drafting or revision of its rules. The Open Learning Model allows for this and much more.

Attempting to join ethical issues in Translation and Interpreting with much-developed studies in Applied Ethics for other professions is complicated by the lack of meta-ethical thought in our profession. When applying the Open Learning Model to the teaching of interpreting, one comes across a ‘missing link’: the meta-ethics of the teaching of translation and interpreting, or ‘academia as a professional setting’. The construction of ethical values as (free) collective knowledge in a class, a university department or School is an exercise in critical thought in itself, involving a self-reflective effort on the part of everyone in order to keep ahead of the times, not just technically but, most importantly, with regard to Meta-ethics, an exercise which is essential to what one could call the ‘art of ethical maintenance’.

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