

Perpetual Translation: Conveying the Languages and Practices of Student Voice and Pedagogical Partnership across Differences of Identity, Culture, Position, and Power

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Abstract:

In this Personal Reflection I explore how the metaphor of translation captures the simultaneous suspension and engagement necessary for communicating across differences of context, culture, identity, position, and power and for transforming ourselves through that communication. I focus in particular on how “translation” illuminates my own and my colleagues’ efforts within educational development to facilitate student voice and pedagogical partnership work with the goal of expanding access and supporting inclusive and culturally responsive pedagogical practices in higher education. I discuss how I endeavor to translate and am translated in two contexts in which I collaborate with colleagues, Aotearoa New Zealand and Italy, and how these experiences inform my practice as an educational developer at my home institution in the United States. Across contexts, both literally and figuratively, “translation” captures how my colleagues and I carry what we know across linguistic and cultural differences and find new ways of interpreting, reinterpreting, and naming our commitments to equity and inclusion. We find the need to create multiple versions of ourselves through these processes of critical analysis and conveyance.

Key Words:

translation, student voice, pedagogical partnership, educational development.

What Terms Can Convey

Last year I was invited to support the further development of student voice and pedagogical partnership work on several university campuses in Aotearoa New Zealand. In conversations with both Māori and Pākehāⁱ colleagues in this bicultural country, I learned that the term “student voice” resonates there as elsewhere as a reference to the literal absence of student voices from discussions of educational policy and practice and, more metaphorically, suggests that sound, specifically speaking, is representative of presence, participation, and power of individuals and/or of a collective group of students (Cook-Sather, 2006; see also Rudduck & Flutter, 2000). Similarly, I learned that the terms used to name the principles of pedagogical partnership I have embraced—respect, reciprocity, and shared responsibility for teaching and learning (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014)—resonate deeply with Māori principles of *mana ōrite* (the prestige that other people attribute to you; to be the same as, equal) and *ako* (to learn and to teach through a process that is relational and social), which are forms of partnership true to Māori values.

In contrast, I learned that the term “partnership,” which colleagues from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States and I have used to refer to the collaborative, reciprocal process through which student and faculty partners “contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis” (Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014, pp. 6-7), is met with some reservation. It evokes what many Māori experience as failed promises made by the Crown traced back to the Treaty of Waitangi, the founding document of the country. The experiences of inequitable workings of an educational system that is more welcoming of and responsive to Pākehā than to Māori and Pacific Islanders, the indigenous peoples of the country, remains problematic (Berryman & Eley, 2017). In short, the term “partnership” evokes for some colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand pressing questions around identity, access, and power. As my Pākehā colleague explained, “Within a bicultural country where the Treaty of Waitangiⁱⁱ as a founding document has offered hope in return for control, resources for consent, and education for integration, partnership has come at cost” (Roseanna Bourke, Personal Communication, April 4, 2018; see also Berryman, Bourke, & Cook-Sather, in preparation).

This experience was a powerful illustration of the ways in which principles and practices can resonate strongly across cultures and contexts even as the terms used to convey those can signal affirmation and empowerment in one context and failed promises and disenfranchisement in another. It highlighted the complexities that can arise around the multiple meanings of “terms,” which refers both to words and to conditions for action. It confirmed for me that my colleagues in Aotearoa New Zealand and I all strive to support the evolution of pedagogical analyses and practices that pursue equity and inclusion in classrooms, recognize that expertise is fluid and developmental, and rely on and foster reflection and revision (Lee, 2017). At the same time, it taught me that, even when we embrace the same underlying premises, those of us working in this way can misunderstand one another such that distrust and disenfranchisement are exacerbated. In other words, we can “talk past each other” (Metge & Kinloch, 1984, p. 10). It reminded me of Steiner’s (1998) claim that “human

communication equals translation” (p. 49) and made newly imperative for me that we raise questions about who is included (Bovill et al., 2016), how democratic practices are conceptualized and enacted (Bergmark & Westman, 2016; Cook-Sather, Bovill, & Felten, 2014; Crawford, 2012), and how to complicate conceptions of identity (Mercer-Mapstone et al., 2018) in pedagogical partnership. The experience reinforced for me that our efforts to enact student voice and pedagogical partnership can train attention on issues of power, access, and identity, but only if they are part of a process of perpetual translation.

Translation as Metaphor and Practice

The root of “translation” is the Latin *translatio*, which means to carry over or to transfer. I have argued that, as a metaphor, “translation” illuminates the ways in which engagement in educational practice and research require that we learn new terms (words) for conveying meaning and that we transform ourselves into new versions of those selves (new ways of being) (Cook-Sather, 2003, 2006, 2009, 2012). These processes both preserve something of the former versions, as must be the case with all translations (Agosín, 2000; Benjamin, 2000; Santos, 2000), even as they render anew. Furthermore, they are always influenced by power, identity, and position (Snell-Hornby, 2006), which inform what is to be translated and who decides what criteria are used to make such decisions (Castro, 2009). My experience in Aotearoa New Zealand reminded me that I need to continually interrogate constructs and the terms that strive to capture them, such as partnership, for what they are carrying over from one context to another. It reminded me that part of the work of perpetual translation is the intricate balance between offering terms and embracing redefinition in, on, and through others’ terms.

Carrying this deepened understanding back to my own educational context, I reconsidered the ways in which the pedagogical partnership program I facilitate at Bryn Mawr and Haverford Colleges might be supporting, or hindering, participants’ ability to translate themselves into both learners and teachers in and on the terms the program offers and in and on their own terms. Since its co-creation by a group of faculty, students and administrators in 2006, Students as Learners and Teachers (SaLT) has focused on developing more inclusive and culturally responsive classrooms in part through positioning students traditionally underrepresented in and underserved by institutions of higher education as partners in the work of educational development (Cook-Sather, 2018a; Cook-Sather et al., 2019, in press). Through SaLT, undergraduate students take up the paid position of pedagogical consultant to faculty, and student-faculty pairs work in semester-long partnerships to analyze, affirm, and, where appropriate, revise the faculty member’s pedagogical approaches in a course before, during, or after they teach it. Partners explore a wide range of pedagogical and curricular issues, such as addressing complex classroom dynamics, facilitating engaged discussion, and designing effective and inclusive assignments and assessments.

Participants in SaLT both translate and are translated by their work, engaging in the “never-finished processes of change” through which mental perceptions, linguistic terms, and human selves can be newly comprehended, communicated, and expressed (Cook-Sather & Abbot, 2016). In this context, students, faculty, and I work against traditional assumptions regarding who has access to processes of knowledge

production about teaching and learning, reposition ourselves in relation to that knowledge production and to one another, and share power as we co-create pedagogical approaches. All of these practices are forms of perpetual translation, but they are experienced differently by differently positioned participants. My experience in Aotearoa New Zealand, which taught me about their particular historical underpinning to the partnership understanding, prompted me to reinterpret my own historical and current position as a white, economically privileged, cis-gendered female working in educational development. My experience reaffirmed the importance of learning from student and faculty colleagues with different identities from my own about the presence and repression of indigenous knowledges in the context of higher education and how student voice and pedagogical partnership might increase the former and redress the latter. For instance, I have learned from my dialogue and collaboration with student partners how to reconceptualize success as more relational than individual (Cook-Sather, 2018b), how to understand resistances in partnership as forms of resilience (Ntem & Cook-Sather, 2018), and how to frame the work of pedagogical partnership as striving to enact a form of epistemic justice (de Bie et al., 2019, in press). My experience in Aotearoa New Zealand made me better able to engage critically with both terms I have used and terms new to me and to reposition myself as a learner and partner in this work.

Perpetual Translation Embodied

The majority of the work I have done in relation to conveying and being conveyed by the languages and practices of student voice and pedagogical partnership work has unfolded in contexts in which I could use English to communicate. However, at the invitation of my colleague, Valentina Grion, at the University of Padua in Italy, I joined her and other colleagues (e.g., Fedeli, 2017) to develop student voice and pedagogical partnership in the Italian context. As Frison and Melacarne (2017) explain, in Italy there is a “strongly felt need for supplying a clear theoretical and methodological approach to those educational practices that are flourishing in Italy according to a ‘student voice’ approach, oriented towards developing partnerships between students and teachers.” I learned from Valentina and her colleagues about the challenges not only of introducing new linguistic terms and the practices they signal, such as student voice and pedagogical partnership, but also of finding ways to ground those in their cultural context, which requires developing whole new ways of being.

Whereas the need for perpetual translation in Aotearoa New Zealand was brought home to me through the single term “partnership,” in this context every term required translation. I experienced this perpetual translation in real time as Valentina translated one of my talks from English to Italian as I delivered it (Cook-Sather, 2016). As I spoke, then waited for her to translate, I experienced the strange rhythm of speaking words I knew but my audience couldn’t understand, then listening to a translation the audience could comprehend but I could not. It was both jarring and newly illuminating, tacking between engaged comprehension and temporary suspension. From moment to moment, I had to move from being fully embodied, articulating my passion and perspective using words that made sense to me, to silent suspension, waiting for Valentina to offer words that would fill listeners in their own language and continue the process of sense making in their own context. And all the while I know that

Valentina was not only translating the ideas I was offering but also infusing them with her contextual and cultural knowledge and her own commitments, such that they, and I, became different versions from what I articulated. In a reciprocal process informed by the particular socio-historical and geographical time and space in which Valentina, those educators in the room, and I engaged, we co-created new, and various, understandings. This collaboration built on the publication of an edited volume (Grion & Cook-Sather, 2013) whose ultimate form in Italian meant that, while I had co-edited the early English drafts, I could not read the final Italian ones—the only book I have ever published that I cannot read, yet that I fully understand, and one that conveys our shared commitment to student voice and pedagogical partnership.

Conclusion

The student voice and pedagogical partnership work that student and faculty colleagues and I have co-created and continue to revise reflect our efforts to find and forge terms for naming and being that are collaborative and reciprocal and also always in the service of ensuring access and supporting inclusive and responsive pedagogical practices. They require that we re-interpret our identities, positions, and power and how all of those inform the ways we work together in educational contexts. I welcome the ways in which each new student voice and pedagogical partnership effort prompts me to examine critically my assumptions about the meanings of words, the cultural historical understanding behind the constructs, the practices and relationships they signal, and the possibilities for transformation that perpetual translation affords. Translation remains the metaphor that captures for me the simultaneous suspension and engagement, the distance and proximity, necessary for this work of communicating across differences identity, culture, position, and power, finding new ways of interpreting and naming our commitments to equity and inclusion, and becoming new versions of ourselves through these processes of critical analysis and conveyance.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Roseanna Bourke, Laura Cruz, Valentina Grion, Alice Lesnick, Michele Parker, Elliott Shore, and three anonymous reviewers for their affirmations and suggestions for revision, all of which improved this essay.

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ⁱ A Māori-language term for New Zealanders of European descent.

ⁱⁱ “The Treaty of Waitangi is New Zealand’s founding document. It takes its name from the place in the Bay of Islands where it was first signed, on 6 February 1840. This day is now a public holiday in New Zealand. The Treaty is an agreement, in Māori and English, that was made between the British Crown and about 540 Māori rangatira (chiefs)... [In the Treaty] the word ‘sovereignty’ was translated as ‘kawanatanga’ (governance). Some Māori believed they were giving up government over their lands but retaining the right to manage their own affairs. The English version guaranteed ‘undisturbed possession’ of all their ‘properties’, but the Māori version guaranteed ‘tino rangatiratanga’ (full authority) over ‘taonga’ (treasures, which may be intangible). Māori understanding was at odds with the understanding of those negotiating the Treaty for the Crown, and as Māori society valued the spoken word, explanations given at the time were probably as important as the wording of the document.”
(<https://nzhistory.govt.nz/politics/treaty/the-treaty-in-brief>)