Ethics in Interpreter & Translator Training
Critical Perspectives

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Abstract. *This introduction to the ITT special issue on Ethics and the Curriculum argues the need to engage more systematically with ethical issues in the context of translator and interpreter training, particularly in view of recent technological, social, political and professional developments that are yet to be explored in the literature in terms of ethical implications. The authors argue that accountability is now a key issue in all professions, and that the responsibility of translators and interpreters extends beyond clients to include the wider community to which they belong. In order for students to embrace this responsibility and develop an awareness of their impact on society, the classroom must be configured as an open space for reflection and experimentation. The article proposes types of activity that may be incorporated in the translation and interpreting curriculum in order to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on ethical questions in their own work and in the work of other translators and interpreters and it outlines some of the challenges posed to educators in this context.*

Keywords. Accountability, Assessment, Classroom activities, Controversial issues, Ethics, Pedagogy, Reflexivity, Responsibility.

The impact and implications of recent technological developments have received considerable attention in the literature, particularly with respect to the way technology has introduced changes in working practices (Kenny 2007, Garcia 2009, Roziner and Shlesinger 2010), and the way it has inevitably led to a rethinking of the relationship between source and target texts (Littau 1997/2010),[1] or to the tendency to treat language merely as a rudimentary

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[1] Littau notes the following as one of the consequences of technological advances, but does not explore its ethical implications: "the hypertext system, not the author, nor the translator, or reader, generates a (foreign) text's productivity endlessly, and reconfigures the once distinct roles attributed to the author, the translator, or reader respectively. Here, the user of hypertext plunders any and every text, every resource; here, all acts of reading, or acts of translation, are collaborative acts of writing, are versionings" (*ibid.*:446).

tool of communication, to be adapted to suit the requirements of computers (Raley 2003/2010). Relatively little, however, has been written on the impact of recent developments, technological and non-technological, on the way professional translators and interpreters think about their relationships to others. With few exceptions (Cronin 2003, Jones 2004, Maier 2007, Inghilleri 2008, 2009, 2010), the scholarly literature remains silent on the way translators and interpreters might respond to the significant developments taking place today in all areas of society: at the level of social policy, political systems and events, technological innovation, marketing strategies and professional culture.[2] By contrast, professional translators and interpreters themselves have begun to show interest in ethical issues that arise from their positioning in an ever more challenging moral environment.[3] Practising translators and interpreters increasingly acknowledge that they have become central to a range of (human) rights movements that characterize the world today, from movements that advocate the rights of the d/Deaf and other minorities in society (McKee 2003) to those that challenge social and political injustice at the global level (Kahane 2007). As would be expected, when professionals discuss the ethical implications of such developments they do not often address the pedagogical implications of societal changes, but in this area too they have begun to point out the need for translator training to include a "profound understanding of professional ethics" (Bromberg and Jesionowski 2010).[4]

University-level translator and interpreter trainers have long instructed their students to follow professional codes of ethics unquestioningly, and have been slow to provide them with the profound understanding of ethical issues that we call for here. We are aware that there have been recent calls for an increased attention to ethics in the context of pedagogy (Corsellis 2005,

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[2] Broader discussions of the ethics of translation and interpreting do abound in the literature, but these do not specifically address the issue in the context of either training or recent developments in the global arena that have an impact on the working environment of both literary and non-literary translators. For general discussions of the ethics of translation and interpreting, see Steiner (1975), Venuti (1995, 1998), Lane-Mercier (1997), Koskinen (2000), Beetham (2002), Larkosh (2004), Goodwin (2010) and the various articles in Pym (2001) and Bermann and Wood (2005), among others.

[3] See, for example, the recent survey conducted by Foreign Exchange Translations, an agency that specializes in medical translation. The survey was undertaken following a number of exchanges with translators who refused to take on certain assignments, either because they disagreed strongly with the content of the relevant texts or because of some aspect of the client's profile. The results of the survey, and translators' comments on the site, suggest that ethics is now a major concern for the profession. See http://blog.fxtrans.com/2010/07/refusing-translations-on-ethical-moral.html (last accessed 4 December 2010).

[4] Bromberg and Jesionowski are the co-designers of the Interpreter Online training programme at Bromberg and Associates, a translation agency located in southeast Michigan.

Arrojo 2005b, Washbourne 2010), but sustained discussions are yet to be found, and it is this lack that prompted both the current special issue and the comments that follow with respect to the articles it contains and the role of ethics in translator and interpreter training. Like Goodwin (2010), we would argue that ethics is not extrinsic to translation (and interpreting), an activity that in itself is intrinsically ethical.

One major development in the professional world at large that must be taken on board in designing translator and interpreter training syllabuses is the increased emphasis on 'accountability', now a key word in all professions. Increased accountability has led to increased visibility, and hence greater pressure on the profession as a whole to demonstrate that it is cognizant of its impact on society. Thus, for instance, the conduct of translators and interpreters is now often scrutinized by the media, especially in the context of recent wars in Kosovo, Iraq and Afghanistan.[5] For translators and inter-preters, accountability means that they are increasingly held responsible for the consequences of their behaviour and therefore have to reflect carefully about how their decisions, both textual and non-textual, impact the lives of others. Importantly, a translator or interpreter must be able to justify a decision (morally) to him- or herself as well as those who might question it. This pro-cess is made increasingly difficult today by an intense push for globalization in all walks of life, a rampant corporate culture, a growing sense of social injustice within and across communities, and a re-emergence of aggressive political ideologies that have initiated or re-ignited violent conflict in many parts of the world. The disjuncture between this challenging reality and the traditional professional ethos of neutrality and non-engagement, as expressed in numerous codes of practice and taught in most classrooms, can leave many practitioners with a sense of unease or disorientation. The ethos of neutrality often blinds them to the consequences of their actions.

In order to address the question of accountability, educators need to engage far more directly and explicitly with the issue of ethics and build it into the curriculum. They need to offer trainee translators and interpreters the conceptual means to reflect on various issues and situations that they may be confronted with in professional life, and which they may find morally taxing, without having to fall back unthinkingly on rigid, abstract codes of practice. But they also need to alert trainees to the ethical implications of behaviour that they might regard as routine, unproblematic, and hence not experience as challenging from a moral point of view. As Sternberg argues in a recent article in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* (2009:B14), "[w]hat is frighten-ing about ethical lapses is not that they happen to the ethically outrageous but that they can sneak up on just about all of us", usually because we do not recognize an issue or situation as a site of ethical decision making. Seen in

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[5] See Baker (2010) for an extended discussion of such coverage.

this way, one could suggest, as Sternberg does, that ethical decision making is a feature of all situations, not only those in which one finds oneself faced with controversial issues on highly conflictual assignments.

Part of the education delivered to translation and interpreting students must therefore be geared towards helping them recognize that practically all decisions they make as professionals will potentially have ethical implications. In order to encourage students to take responsibility for their decisions, we believe, it is important that teachers refrain from prescribing strategies or specific courses of action. The decisions made during the course of translating and interpreting can potentially have considerable impact on the survival of individuals and even whole communities; at the very least they can impact the quality of life of those who rely on the translator or interpreter to mediate for them, whether in business meetings or healthcare encounters, in daily interaction between host country officials and vulnerable migrants, or in preparing instructions for the use of a food mixer. Training in this area must therefore remain reflective; it cannot be based on an authoritarian list of dos and don'ts, since following any such list or the educator's preferences blindly undermines the principle of accountability. Building ethics into the curriculum means opening up a space for critical reflection, training students to think through the consequences of their behaviour, rather than telling them what is right or wrong *per se*. Reflecting critically on ethical behaviour means examining one's own values, becoming more aware of them, and assessing them critically. It is ultimately a question of personal integrity, not skill in following a prescribed set of rules. This view is reflected in all contributions to the current volume. All contributors view the classroom as a space of experimentation and reflection, a protected arena where students must be made to feel free to rehearse *any* argument, and be allowed to take responsibility for the decisions they reach.

1.   Learning tasks and pedagogical tools

But what activities, whether formally assessed or otherwise, might be undertaken in this space? How might we provide an opportunity for students to reflect on and rehearse ethical arguments? We suggest that there are three issues that need to be addressed as far as training in ethics is concerned, and that classroom activities should provide opportunities for engaging with these issues.

First, training should aim to provide students with the *conceptual tools* they need to reason critically about the implications of any decision. This means engaging with some of the theoretical literature on ethics that can provide a coherent terminology and a means of reflecting on the pros and cons of particular ways of justifying behaviour (see Baker 2011). Second, training should enable students to identify a range of *potential strategies* that

may be deployed to deal with ethically difficult or compromising situations, such as the switch from first to third person pronoun in interpreting, as exemplified in Donovan (this volume). And third, educators need to develop a set of *pedagogical tools* that can be used to create an environment in which students can make situated ethical decisions, rehearse the implications of such decisions, and learn from this experience. Activities within and outside the classroom can be designed to provide all three types of opportunity.

Classroom debate of a specific case study could constitute one such activity. We would argue that it is particularly valuable to debate controversial issues in the classroom; as Zembylas *et al.* (2010:563) confirm,

> [i]nvestigations of the effects of teaching and learning about controversial issues show that if students have opportunities to discuss such issues in an open supportive classroom environment, they are more likely to develop positive civic and political attitudes, multiperspectivity, feelings of tolerance and empathy, and critical thinking skills.

The high profile case of Katharine Gun,[6] discussed in Drugan and Megone's feature article (see also Baker 2008, 2011), is one of several potential controversies that can be debated in the classroom. The *New York Times* recently discussed another controversial case which can be debated fruitfully in class (Cohen 2010). Cohen quoted a New York-based translator, Simon Fortin, describing an ethical dilemma he experienced:

> I was hired to do the voice-over for a French version of the annual video report of a high-profile religious organization. The video opposes gay marriage, a view untenable to me. During the recording session, I noticed various language errors. Nobody there but I spoke French, and I considered letting these errors go: my guilt-free sabotage. Ultimately I made the corrections. As a married gay man, I felt ethically compromised even taking this job. Did I betray my tribe by correcting the copy?

In a recent issue of *Multilingual* which devotes much space to the question of ethics in the profession, Terena Bell, CEO of a Kentucky-based translation company, offers numerous such examples. She starts by posing the following question (Bell 2010:41):

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[6] Katharine Gun worked for a British intelligence agency as a translator between English and Chinese until 2003, when she leaked secret documents to the press and was arrested for treason. The documents related to illegal activities by the United States and Britain.

> If Blackwater[7] asked you to translate assembly instructions for an automatic rifle, would you do it? What if they told you the document's target audience was teenagers in the Sudan? This is not a hypothetical, but a real dilemma my staff had to grapple with a few years ago.

She goes on to remind us, however, that controversial issues are not restricted to questions of war and physical violence (*ibid.*), nor, we would add, to the issue of sexuality, or of religion:

> Military contracts and contractors aside, the language services profession is replete with controversial issues. If you're pro-life, do you interpret for an abortion clinic? If you're pro-choice, do you interpret for a crisis pregnancy center? And it doesn't stop there. Legal interpreters who are against the death penalty may have to interpret judgments they don't agree with, and feminist translators are asked to localize for adult entertainment.

Debating such issues in the supportive environment of the classroom allows students to rehearse both sides of an argument freely, and to think through its ethical implications from different perspectives.

Another task might consist of writing a *critical essay* on a specific issue such as volunteer work or omission of material deemed offensive to the target culture. Alternatively, a critical essay might discuss one type of theorizing about ethics, such as Kantian ethics or Levinas's notion of hospitality, and its implications for translation practice.

Yet another activity might take the form of *role play* as part of a *simulated scenario* in the classroom, a pedagogical tool particularly suited to interpreting practice and designed to prepare students for situations in which they have to make decisions very quickly, on the spot. Glielmi and Long (1999) provide a sample of such simulated scenarios, involving sign language interpreters working with rape victims. *Simulated translation tasks*, using authentic texts and briefs, similarly provide an opportunity for exploring the implications of a specific textual choice or series of choices, as in Floros (this volume). *Student diaries* also provide excellent opportunities for individual reflection on uncomfortable situations (see Abdalla, this volume).

2.   Challenging questions for educators

Treating the classroom as an open space for reflection on ethical issues and refraining from prescribing or even recommending particular ethical paths

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[7] Blackwater is a private military company based in the US. Among its many activities, it provided translators for the US military in Iraq and Afghanistan. Blackwater is the subject of numerous legal cases relating to the killing of civilians and abuse of prisoners.

clearly makes the issue of *assessment* more problematic. On what basis, and according to what criteria, can educators assess the performance of students in terms of ethical decision making? An answer that seems obvious to us is that we should develop assessment criteria that focus on the quality of reasoning and reflection, rather than the final decision reached.

Another challenge relates to the *scope of the discipline* and what is generally referred to as 'the profession'. Should training focus only on the prototypical, trained professional who chooses translation and/or interpreting as a career, or should it address the wider context of translation and interpreting in society? Translation and interpreting are often undertaken by volunteers, for instance, who may or may not have received university training in the field and may or may not work as paid professionals in some contexts. Boéri and de Manuel Jerez (this volume) report positive student evaluation of video recordings drawn from communicative situations covered by volunteer interpreters and used as training material in the classroom. This suggests that classrooms can fruitfully draw on material produced by non-paid interpreters and translators who may or may not be formally trained. But should the types of training offered to such individuals also be taken into consideration? In situations of violent conflict, translation and interpreting are undertaken by a wide range of professionals, from doctors and engineers to taxi drivers and civil servants, as one of the few means of earning a living. Tipton (this volume) assumes that training can and should be provided 'on the job' to such individuals.

The literature on ethics, like most of the literature on translation and interpreting, has traditionally assumed that translators and interpreters are primarily responsible to their clients, or the author of the source text in the case of literary translation in particular. But as Boéri and de Manuel Jerez, and Gill and Guzmán, argue in this volume, translators and interpreters have an ethical responsibility to the wider community and to humanity, over and above their responsibility to clients and authors. To what extent should our training prepare students to act responsibly as *citizens*, rather than merely as professionals? And can the two be separated?

One of the potential challenges that educators face in the context of incorporating ethics into the curriculum is the *persistent gap between theory and practice* in the discipline. Students are often resistant to theory, especially at the beginning of their degree programme, and may fail to see the connection between abstract theoretical concepts and everyday professional reality. This resistance may extend to reflection on ethical implications. However, using authentic, real life case studies and introducing interactive tasks in the classroom should demonstrate to students the relevance of ethics and the liberating effect of being able to reflect on the impact of their behaviour on others. Boéri and de Manuel Jerez's findings (this volume) are reassuring in this respect: they report that students' evaluation of speeches by representatives of social movements and those on topics such as the relationship

between poverty and war was particularly positive. Engagement with ethical issues can thus motivate students and demonstrate the importance of theory and reflective, critical reasoning.
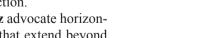
There remains the question of *the positioning of the educator* and the extent to which educators can or should reveal their own views on any of the issues raised in the classroom. On the one hand, as we argued above, students should be encouraged to reach their own decisions after reflecting on the implications of different choices. Knowing where their teacher stands in relation to the issue under consideration is likely to influence their thinking, or at least discourage them from arguing the opposite position forcefully. On the other hand, one could argue that for an instructor to have and state a point of view does not necessarily imply the imposition of his or her opinion on students. As Rosemary Arrojo has explained (2005a), "both teachers and students should become aware . . . of the power structures that make both teaching and translation possible by way of a constant and relentless examination of what is occurring and what is involved in any translation act, especially inside the classroom itself". Achieving a productive balance between an educator's right to his or her own ethical judgement and responsibility to maintain the classroom as an open space of reflection remains one of the most difficult challenges in this context.[8]

3.   The current volume

Bearing in mind the need to configure the classroom as a space of experimentation and reflection as described above, we open the volume with **Rebecca Tipton**'s article, which offers a challenging and thought-provoking introduction to the seven essays. Here, the classroom is a war zone and learning occurs between civilian interpreters and the military personnel for whom they are contracted to interpret. As Tipton explains, that learning experience is best described in terms of a horizontal relationship in which both parties have much to teach the other about an unfamiliar culture and its expectations. Mutually engaged in a situation of conflict and flux, neither acquires a body of knowledge; instead, they develop together an increased understanding of how to 'be' in that shared situation. What Tipton refers to as their learning relationship has not as yet received much attention in the literature, but she makes a strong argument for considering it an area of vital interest given the increasingly prominent role of interpreters in situations of conflict, where locally recruited interpreters must be taught on the job by military personnel who in turn must depend on their interpreters for instruction.

Like Tipton, **Julie Boéri** and **Jesús de Manuel Jerez** advocate horizontal learning and training situations and methodologies that extend beyond the context of immediate textual mediation. Their study draws on narrative

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[8] See also Arrojo (1995, 2005b), Davison-Pégon (2006) and Maier (2003).

theory to reconceptualize the paradigm of conference interpreting within a socio-cultural perspective. Focusing on two innovative action-research collaborative projects run at the University of Granada, they describe the successful classroom use of video recordings of volunteer interpreters in real communicative situations instead of the practice of reading aloud and the use of simulated discourses provided by the instructor. This material fostered students' reflection on ethical issues related to resistant as well as dominant discourse in society, thus preparing them to work in a wide variety of interpreting situations.

Georgios Floros, working with two case studies, also focuses on the formation of practitioners who are aware of the ethical decisions involved in translating sensitive texts, in this instance political texts related to conflicts between Greeks and Greek Cypriots. His work was prompted by the disillusion he observes in students when they realize that their unquestioned theoretical ideals operate in contradiction to actual translation practice. Drawing on a discussion of norms, values and narratives and referring to the work of various theorists, he argues that theories do not prescribe practice but must be questioned and applied as deemed appropriate in given situations. Floros outlines what he refers to as a "modestly postmodern" framework that he has developed for enabling students to reflect on the social and ethical implications of the choices they make.

The awareness, as advocated by Floros, that ethical responsibility extends well beyond classroom assignments is at the centre of **Rosalind Gill** and **María Constanza Guzmán**'s teaching in Toronto. They describe two closely related experiences: one based on teaching Spanish-English translation; the other concerned with teaching socially aware French-English translation based on an ecological paradigm in which students actively participate in the construction of meaning. Together, Gill and Guzmán stress the need for a pedagogy that informs students about the social and ethical implications of their work.

The importance stressed by Gill and Guzmán of considering translation and interpreting in terms of the translator's or interpreter's role in and responsibility to their community, indeed the world, is also central in **Clare Donovan**'s article on the teaching of conference interpreting. As Donovan explains, conference interpreting, unlike other forms of interpreting, has traditionally focused primarily on the cognitive aspects of the interpreting process. Recently, however, there has been a shift in the way conference interpreting is studied and taught. Ethics plays an increasing role in the discipline's perception of itself, including greater awareness of the similarities among the various forms of interpreting and the need for interpreter training to address the many sensitive situations and potentially compromising decisions that conference interpreters routinely encounter or have to make.

Community is also of prime concern to **Kristiina Abdallah**. Her focus, however, is on the community of translation professionals who work together

in production networks, which she characterizes as a "breeding ground for moral dilemmas". Abdallah describes a 'Professional Business Skills' course developed at the University of Tampere in order to prepare students to work responsibly as they experience the many ethical concerns that arise in the language industry. One of the features of the course is the use of student diaries, which she and her colleagues found to be an excellent pedagogical tool. She also draws on material from discussions carried out in a Moodle learning environment, a sophisticated variant of Wiki, and blogs.

Although not discussed as explicitly as 'community', the concept of 'context' has figured significantly in each of the articles outlined above – once one thinks in terms of interaction among groups, particularly in situations as complex and potentially fraught as those involved in translating and interpreting, context inevitably enters the discussion, and the inadequacy of a deontological approach to ethical challenges becomes apparent. One then finds oneself responding with expressions such as "it depends" when queried about appropriate professional conduct. This response has long been recognized as unsatisfactory by students and instructors alike, and the need to formulate a response that is more helpful to all parties involved is the focus of the research presented by **Robyn K. Dean** and **Robert Q Pollard, Jr**. Their research, based on demand control theory, demonstrates that an outcomes-focused, context-based analysis of interpreting work and the resultant decisions lead to beneficial results. Like Tipton, although in a very different context from the one she discusses, Dean and Pollard worked with a learning relationship, to use Tipton's term, that in their case involved both the interpreter and the consumers of the interpreting (the person[s] being interpreted and the person[s] for whom the interpreting is performed). Of particular interest here is the frequent mention in the literature of the need, indeed the responsibility of translator and interpreter trainers, to inform the consumer or client of the complex nature of the translation or interpreting process by creating precisely the sort of three-way dialogues discussed by Dean and Pollard. Such relationships are themselves pedagogical in nature, in that they serve to instruct all participants in the exchange (see also Clifford 2004).[9]

In the final (and feature) article of the volume, **Joanna Drugan** and **Chris Megone** present a systematic approach to incorporating questions of ethics into the translating and interpreting curriculum. Basing their suggestions on their own work in the Masters programme at the University of Leeds, they show that despite the fact that ethics rarely forms part of that curriculum, it can be included successfully, even though the schedule of material to be

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[9] Keiran Dunne (personal communication, 2010) has made a related argument with respect to the language industry: "client education is a *major* problem in the industry today … and information asymmetry in the current market has been largely overlooked in translation pedagogy, to the detriment of the profession".

covered is already very full. Drugan and Megone argue that ethics must not be considered a topic separate from practice, and they reject the use of both optional modules on ethics and the relegation of ethics to one lecture or chapter or to a few isolated examples. Instead, they offer a number of case studies that can provide the basis for a wide range of activities and serve to embed ethics training in the curriculum, much as it has been or is being embedded in the training provided in other 'practice professions', to use Dean and Pollard's term. Drugan and Megone's article provides an excellent conclusion to the volume, because all the other articles could be discussed in the context of the approach they outline.

Taken together, the articles in this volume call for a radically altered view of the relationship between ethics and the translating and interpreting profession, a relationship in which ethical decisions can rarely, if ever, be made *a priori* but must be understood and taught as an integral and challenging element of one's work. It is our hope that they will inspire further research on this important and highly consequential aspect of translator and interpreter training.

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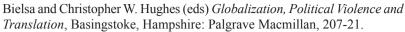
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