



A Tale of Two Collaborative Classrooms: Early Success and Follow-on Failure

How did two translation courses taught by the same instructor with a similar course template and teaching methods wind up with such different outcomes?

In 2013, I taught a four-credit course in which 14 rookie translation students rendered all 9,228 words of Guy de Maupassant's *Le Horla*. They did this in fewer than 15 weekly meetings, each lasting almost two hours.

My students at the New School for Social Research (NSSR) in New York City managed to complete this lengthy literary translation even though I also brought in three guest speakers, held a midterm and final exam, and administered bi-weekly terminology quizzes.

How did I manage this? I fostered grit, determination, passion for the text, and collaboration, along with relying on my own willful blindness and a touch of beginner's luck. I say beginner's luck because, as I learned later, this group of

students had a particular alchemy that helped them succeed.

WORKING WITH A COMMON KNOWLEDGE BASE

One of the most important ingredients in the class's success was that most of the 14 students had a solid foundation in French grammar, having already taken all the French-language course offerings at NSSR. This meant that I didn't have to juggle wildly disparate proficiency levels. The class included 10 undergrads, one master's candidate, one student auditing the class, and two continuing education students.

It's important to understand the particular personality of most New School students: out-of-the-box thinking

Illustration based on "Gravure sur bois de Gorges Lemoine d'après un dessin de William Julian-Damazy" from Maupassant's *Le Horla*; Source: Wikipedia Public Domain

is expected in most areas of study. Many of my students came from various university divisions, including the Parsons School of Design, Mannes School of Music, Eugene Lang College, and the School of Public Engagement.

TEACHING APPROACH/ BREAKING MY OWN RULES

My teaching methodology was well suited to this group. In four years as the translation and interpreting studies coordinator at New York University's School of Professional Studies (NYU-SPS) from 2011–2015, I reviewed instructor syllabi for the now-defunct all-online NYU translation program, which ran 20–30 translation courses per semester in eight language pairs. So, I had a pretty good idea of how to use creative methods to develop an effective course.

Then I broke my own rules. I had always advised new NYU faculty never to assign more than 500 words of translation per week because students would complain that assignments took too long. But I gave my NSSR students 700 words (or more) per week. (I've always believed in the "where-there's-a-will-there's-a-way" approach to learning.) My main mission was to make my passion for Maupassant's *Le Horla* contagious without putting students in intensive care. I'd give them the tools and resources to translate, ramp up their analytical skills, and invite them into a thoughtful conversation about literary translation.

Why did I choose this text? First published in 1886, *Le Horla*, a horror story written as a series of diary entries, recounts the unmooring of the narrator's mind as he attempts to grapple with a world that's increasingly tumultuous, absurd, and violent. I had read it as a student at the Sorbonne back in the mid-1990s and remembered it as extremely entertaining. So, in 2012, when my NSSR director asked me for literary translation course ideas, I suggested it would be a good fit for many of her former students who were planning to take my class.

WORKING TOGETHER

Over the years, I've discovered students learn as much (and sometimes more) from fellow students as they do from instructors; the shy ones finding it easier to ask questions of their peers.

I split *Le Horla* into 13 passages of roughly 700 words each: seven were assigned as homework, which students translated on their own, and six were studied collaboratively in class. For each collaborative passage, I prepared questions on grammar/syntax, terminology, research, and points of general discussion. These questions helped structure the students' thinking about *Le Horla* and stimulated discussion about the text.

In the syllabus bibliography, I included an extensive toolkit of online translation resources and a broad list of hardcopy dictionaries.

Before each class, I assigned working groups of three to four students to take on sub-passages consisting of 175 to 250 words. I grouped students according to complementary skill sets, always striving to make the more advanced translators in the class the de facto group leaders. To give the weaker students extra translation practice, I advised group leaders to be more involved in the revision process.

Although students often debated passionately about language and were extremely detail-oriented in their renderings,

they naturally reached consensus on terminology, grammar, and syntax.

We usually critiqued in-class work during the last 20 minutes of each meeting. During these critiques, the group that did the translation was not allowed to speak. This gave students the opportunity to see how their classmates were thinking.

TACKLING THE TEXT WITH GOOGLE DOCS

I encouraged student collaboration both in class and when working online. Before drafting my syllabus, I contacted the university's information technology department about the best way for students to work collaboratively. The NSSR educational technologist listened patiently to my needs and advised me to use Google Documents (GD) rather than get bogged down in wikis or virtual breakout rooms. Although I had never used GD, I was quickly sold. Some of the features I discovered were:

- All class participants can view edits in real-time.
- GD displays revision history so the instructor can get a clear idea of who contributed what, thereby making grading class participation less arbitrary.
- The software is free and highly intuitive and does not require training.
- GD is cloud-based, so students can make changes via smartphones and/or tablets.

Using GD, I could oversee student work in real-time and prevent possible mistranslations as they arose by gently suggesting that students' understanding of a term, expression, or idiom was incomplete or faulty. Whenever possible, I avoided giving students direct answers, so they worked through problems themselves. I fancied my role as that of a weight room spotter, supplying just enough force to prevent injury while allowing students to push through the translation on their own power.

SUMMARY WRITING/ THWARTING PLAGIARISM

For the first graded assignment, students wrote a plot summary in English of no more than 1,000 words based on

their understanding of the French text. I felt that if they could grasp the basic narrative structure and context, half the battle would be won. In addition, the summary gave me a good idea of their French reading and English writing skills, an insight I later used when forming translation teams.

To foil plagiarism, I decided to let my students "borrow" freely from two published translations I gave to them on the first day of class. I did, however, make their "borrowing" contingent upon citing authorship of the published translations. In addition, they were required to explain how the published version completed their understanding of the text. They, however, seldom exercised this option because they found it easier, faster, and more enjoyable to do their own work.

BALANCING THE CARROT AND THE STICK

My grading code, which was based on those I had seen in NYU syllabi and included in my own syllabus, was devised to encourage students to become autonomous learners and seek improvement rather than perfection. For example, I used the Comment function in MS Word to insert a code in a comment box in the margin of each student's document (e.g., MT for "mistranslation"), followed by a point value and an explanation of the error. Because I consider a mistranslation an egregious error, it would cost more points than, for example, a weak but accurate word choice.

Using the Comment function this way is significantly more labor-intensive than just making the changes to the text. However, I felt students should work through their mistakes and self-correct.

Given the cost of college in the U.S., it's understandable that students worry over their grade point averages and angle for higher grades. That's one reason why I allowed anyone who received a B or lower to resubmit each assignment once, after revising their translations based on my commentary, for a possible higher grade. In a field such as literary translation, which presupposes students have several skill sets—i.e., they must be strong readers in the source language,

TECHNICAL TRANSLATOR

Technical Translator wanted in Timmonsville, SC, by a Japanese translation service company. Must have a BA in translation, languages, or related fields. Requires minimum 3 years experience in the translation service industry. Provides precise translation of Japanese and English technical documents. Superior bilingual abilities in Japanese & English required.

Send resume to:

Honda Language Services, Inc.
3625 Del Amo Blvd, Suite 230
Torrance, CA 90503

excellent writers in the target, and solid Internet sleuths/researchers—I felt it best to give them opportunities to learn by self-correcting and revising.

MAKING THE GRADE

In the end, I felt three students turned in publishable work and the rest produced very coherent, readable translations of a fairly sophisticated text, which, as a teacher, gave me the greatest satisfaction. All except two students made it through all of *Le Horla*—one dropped out of NSSR and the other student was auditing the class. On the final day of class, the students gave me a rousing ovation—the most spontaneous and enthusiastic show of appreciation in my translation teaching career.

To demonstrate the quality of my students' work, I presented a slide of five translations of the same 77-word extract from *Le Horla* at the New England Translators Association conference in May. One was published on the Gutenberg Project website (www.gutenberg.org); my students translated the other four versions. I asked attendees to figure out which was the published passage. Considerable debate ensued and, to my astonishment, only one attendee chose the published version. So, perhaps there was some method to my madness.

WAS IT JUST BEGINNER'S LUCK?

And then I got my comeuppance. Fresh from my success with the literary translation class, I taught an introductory course to professional translation in the fall of 2014 using the same course template. Assignments covered a smattering of subject areas that might land in a professional translator's in-box (e.g., scientific, legal, financial, advertising, and marketing, and UN-related texts). This class consisted of 11 students: 10 undergrads and one graduate student who was auditing the class.

Because we would change subject matter regularly, I assigned students no more than 400 words of homework weekly. Before starting a given homework assignment, we would collaborate in class for at least a week so students could get a feel for the terminology. I also gave them background material on the subject area/

text we were translating so they could get a better sense of the context.

Given my many years of professional translation experience, I actually felt more qualified to teach a course geared toward professional translation than literary translation, and I started the semester with good intentions and great enthusiasm. But I soon found that these students were very different from those who had translated *Le Horla*. Most of them did their assignments and, I hope, learned something, but they showed little passion for the work. Two even failed the class.

EVALUATING WHAT WENT WRONG

What went wrong with version 2.0? I've found a few explanations. For one, since the number of registrants for the introductory course was low, the department opened enrollment to the general student population. Anyone could register, regardless of their French proficiency, resulting in a maddening hodgepodge of skill levels. In addition, a few students were marginally computer literate. For example, they peered at me blankly when I asked them to build a glossary in Excel.

I had dealt with disparate language proficiency skill levels before, but the more serious problem was that, except for three or four students, this group didn't really care about professional translation. They wanted to do literary translation. But they lacked the proficiency for either.

In addition, a computing incompatibility issue resulted in students not being able to view my comments on their work. Throughout each student's translation, I used the MS Word Comment function to leave an extensive running critique in the dialog boxes that appear in a document's margins. Then I would write only brief comments on the bottom of the final translation (e.g., "Bravo!" or "Needs work"). Everyone in this group was using a new Mac, but they did not have Microsoft Office for Mac, so I found out the hard way that the native Mac Pages program doesn't display the MS Word Comment function.

After I returned the first assignment, the silence was deafening. I surveyed the students' long faces.

"Did you read my comments?" I asked.

"What comments?" asked an exasperated student. "I don't see any comments?"

They could view only the brief comments I wrote at the bottom of the page, which made them think I was both lazy and arbitrary!

The class got back on track after we cleared up this misunderstanding, but I believe it's extremely challenging for an instructor to recover after his or her authority has been compromised. My students couldn't relate to the texts they were translating, so the course became a hoop they had to jump through to earn credits, rather than an intellectually gratifying and enjoyable task. Powerful collaborative teaching tools such as GD can't help if the text/subject matter isn't in line with students' needs and expectations.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

What lessons did I learn from my accidental triumph and my dismal failure? In the future, I will work to ensure that students have the proficiency level required for a particular class and that we are all technologically in synch. I will continue to use published translations as both a teaching tool and as a deterrent to plagiarism. I will emphasize students' specific aptitudes in forming collaborative teams. Finally, I will work to strike the right balance between challenging and overwhelming my students.

For me, translating *Le Horla* and running this course was an enjoyable side project and never felt like work. The introductory professional translation course, on the other hand, was, for everyone concerned, a misfit. ●



Steven Gendell is a freelance translator with almost 20 years of experience in a wide array of areas, although his primary focus is on French>English legal and financial translation. He worked as an in-house translator at the Permanent French Mission to the United Nations. He was an adjunct instructor at the Sorbonne in Paris (Paris II–Panthéon-Assas), as well as the translation and interpreting studies coordinator at the New York University School of Professional Studies (2011–2015). Currently, in addition to freelancing from home, he is a part-time translation instructor at the New School for Social Research in New York City. Contact: gendells@newschool.edu.