

# Translation of literary texts and online collaboration: Breaking barriers through virtual exchange

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## Abstract

Literary translation usually brings linguistic, textual, cultural, and pragmatic problems into perspective. As a knowledge-transfer process, it also demands a set of skills as the translator intends to convey, to some extent, the literary subtleties of the original. Graduate students attending a MA seminar of Translation of Literary Texts are frequently asked to undertake the process of translating a selection of excerpts of a variety of literary texts, to acknowledge difficulties and set up strategies for achieving their work. One of the most rewarding tools available to literary translators is working with the author, which is not always feasible in real-life activity and even more unlikely in Literary Translation classes. This report presents the practice of virtual exchange by describing the experience of matching Creative Writing students with students attending a Translation of Literary Texts seminar. Online collaboration gave Literary Translation students a sense of real-life experience by having the opportunity to communicate and work with the author, translating unpublished and untranslated texts. It was not only an opportunity of participating in a collaborative international project by means of virtual exchange, but also an opportunity of translating with the author.

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**Keywords:** virtual exchange; literary translation; collaboration; author and translator; international project

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## 1. Introduction

Translating literary works is generally an intricate and complex process that involves various challenges. It requires the translator to make choices and decisions, breaking barriers between languages and cultures. Literary translation usually brings linguistic, textual, cultural, and pragmatic problems into perspective. As a knowledge-transfer process with aesthetic demands, it is a continuously changing undertaking markedly different from translating non-literary texts. This task demands a specific set of skills, as the translator aims to convey, whenever possible, the style and the literary subtleties of the original.

The last decades have seen a growing number of initiatives and ways of collaboration between authors and translators in society in general and in higher education institutions, such as workshops, seminars, inter-university national projects, inter-university multilingual and international projects focusing on the challenges that transfer problems pose in the teaching, learning, research, and practice of literary translation. Specific published research on the subject is not scarce nowadays (Armitstead, 2019; Flynn, 2013; Hersant, 2017; Huss, 2018; Jansen, 2019; Valdez & Martins, 2021; Vanderschelden, 1998; Washbourne, 2016; Zwischenberger, 2020). As Vanderschelden (1998) remarked, the communication between author and translator is much more common when translating contemporary authors: “It is not unusual nowadays for authors to take an active role in the translation of their work. This type of collaboration, which applies mostly to literary texts, raises some questions concerning the relationship of the translator with the author and the type of bond that an author establishes with his work” (p. 22). One of the most rewarding tools available to literary translators is working directly with the author. However, this is not always feasible in real-life activities and is even more unlikely in literary translation classes in general.

This practice report outlines the inter-university and international network of virtual exchange and online collaboration between students from a university in the northern United States and students from a university in Lisbon, Portugal. It also reinforces the relevance of virtual exchange in the internationalization of universities in the specific field of literary translation, by describing the experience of matching creative writing students with literary translation students. This was an innovative and enriching method to delve into literary translation in MA seminars. The process of exchange and the subsequent data collected contributed to approaching in class some of the recurrent issues in the teaching and practice of literary translation.

## 2. Context

The practice here described evolved from TAPP (the Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project), an international project covering new ways of teaching and writing in a digital age. It was also an innovative experience, within the context of TAPP.

There is already consistent written research about the fundamental issues of the TAPP network, the organisation of partnerships between universities, the theoretical framework, and all the logistics, steps, and operations. As is often the case, students exchanged pre-learning reports, translators received a translation brief, had access to a complete project roster to identify their partners and obtain their email addresses, and both classes received some introductory instructions (Mousten et al., 2010).

In the academic year of 2014/15, TAPP welcomed for the first time such different areas as creative writing and translation of literary texts. The topics highlighted below result from the work of students from both universities during several semesters in different academic years.

In general, graduate students attending a MA seminar in Translation of Literary Texts are frequently asked to translate a selection of excerpts from a variety of literary genres, written by already published writers, to acknowledge difficulties and set up strategies for achieving their work. In this project, the collaboration between authors and translators primarily involved the exchange of emails. For the approximately 30 translation students per semester, this experience fulfilled multiple purposes: collaborating with the author in the context of an academic seminar, learning and practising literary translation through virtual exchange, and translating in class unpublished and untranslated texts, thus experimenting with a sense of real-life experience.

The results achieved, as described in the final report the students were asked to write, enabled us to consider specific characteristics of literary translation that are integral to the course program. These include the authorial intention and the role of the translator, the meaning of the text, the translator's interpretation, the transposition of meaning, as well as the application of translation strategies and techniques, connotations, style, and many other fundamental issues present in literary translation.

This form of inter-university and international exchange introduced a novel teaching approach by enabling future literary translators to engage directly with the writers as part of the course. After reading and interpreting the original text, translation students had the opportunity to exchange

questions with creative writing students and receive answers. This interaction brought new perspectives to both parties, offering creative writing students' insights into their semantic or stylistic choices, and enlightening them about the translation difficulties their texts presented. For the translators, this experience facilitated a balance between the theoretical knowledge acquired and the practical aspects of translation (O'Brien, 2011; Rossi, 2018). This is an important issue in literary translation studies and was one of the main concerns of Carol Maier, translator, teacher at Kent State University and a member of ALTA (The American Literary Translators Association), who advocated the importance of the practice and theory of literary translation in pedagogy (Washbourne, 2016).

This exchange experiment in TAPP was also an opportunity for the students to get to know and deepen their knowledge of other collaborative translation initiatives involving writers and translators. One example of collaborative work and partnerships is associated with *The International Booker Prize*. It is annually awarded to a book translated into English and published in the United Kingdom or Ireland and since 2016 is shared between author and translator. There are also blogs for authors and translators, such as [Authors & Translators](#) open to people of all countries and languages. There are workshops, continuing-education seminars and also translation centres promoting workdays with authors and translators, such as [The Europäisches Übersetzer-Kollegium](#) (European College of Translators) in Straelen, Germany, known as “the first and largest international centre for translators of literature and non-fiction.”

On this specific matter of collaborative literary translation, it is also worth noting the initiative of an online survey on ‘multiple translatorship’, distributed through professional literary translators in Denmark, Norway, and Sweden in 2015 entitled *Collaboration in Literary Translation*, including a section dedicated to the translators’ relationship with ‘their’ authors and to the question of ownership of the translated text (Jansen, 2019). The results about *Collaboration in Literary Translation* were also published online.<sup>2</sup> [PENPAL in Translation](#) (Portuguese-English Platform for Anthologies of Literature in Translation), an inter-university project (2012-2016) focusing on literary translation in higher education that comprises both teaching and research (Valdez & Martins, 2021; Vale de Gato et al., 2016), represents another type of enterprise directly concerned with collaborative translation exchange centred on literary translation. One important output is the already published anthology to which I was co-editor, *Nem cá nem lá: Portugal e América do Norte entre escritas (Neither Here nor ‘ere: Writings Across Portugal and North America)* (Alves et al., 2016).

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2. <https://engerom.ku.dk/collaboration-in-literary-translation/quantitativedata.pdf/>

Other forms of collaborative literary translation (who is collaborating with whom, and how) are likely to bring insight into similar exchanges. According to [Huss \(2018\)](#), there are at least five clear cases of collaborative translation: (1) a translator working directly with the source-text author; (2) two or more translators (usually with complementary linguistic competencies) working together on a translation; (3) translators of the same author working together to create common resources; (4) translation for the stage where a translator works closely with a playwright, director, actors and other human agents; (5) crowdsourced translations (usually mediated by technology) ([Huss, 2018](#)).

### 3. Objectives

Translating fiction and poetry involves addressing challenges such as ambiguities, metaphors, idioms, register, and style. In this study, the primary goal was to explore new practices for translating literary texts in the classroom, by engaging students in collaboration with the author through virtual exchange and participation in an international collaborative project.

The theme of collaboration and the role of the translator has attracted the attention of scholars and academics both in theory and in practice ([Rossi, 2018](#); [Satar, 2021](#); [Washbourne, 2016](#)). Virtual exchange between author-translator, collaborative translation and interaction are closely linked features in Literary Translation Studies. There is a natural tendency when discussing collaborative translation, says [Hersant \(2017\)](#), to gravitate towards relationships such as this one:

Though neither systematic nor even frequent, collaborative relationships between an author and his or her translator reveal blind spots, which are interesting both for translation studies and textual genetics. The exchange between the two parties is not always fruitful, nor amicable; rarely prolonged, it often proves disappointing. Occasionally, however, the experience is rich in teachings and surprises, and offers us valuable insight into the translator's workshop. Collaboration can thus bring into the light of day an activity – that of translation in the making – normally kept in the shadows, revealing its lines of force and fracture, hesitations and revisions, instances of audacity, daring and regret. (p. 91)

In fact, translation projects and the consequent variegated types of collaboration are receiving increasing academic attention. The discussion on authorship and ownership within literary translation, though not new, is still pertinent: the last decades have seen an increasingly intense scholarly debate

on literary translators' role and status, which no doubt influenced the ways in which the practitioners themselves perceive the issue: "From the nineties onwards, a number of influential papers have discussed the author-translator relationship and questioned both the status and the attitude of translators, and prominent translation scholars have pleaded translational emancipation from different theoretical perspectives" (Jansen, 2019, p. 676).

Practising translators have caught the attention of academics, who primarily focus on researching canonical authors and their prestigious translators. Scholars like Vanderschelden (1998), Washbourne (2016), and Hersant (2017) have explored diverse collaboration types. These range from total trust to the more extreme situation of authorial appropriation of the text. Milan Kundera was not an easy author to translate, as he more or less became the translator's corrector, rejecting some of his passages and interpretations. The same happened with Vladimir Nabokov, who clearly manifested a kind of authorial appropriation (Hersant, 2017). There is also the opposite situation. Noteworthy examples include Jorge Luis Borges advising G. Rabassa to convey his intended meaning (Pontiero, 1992), Ezra Pound asking Eva Hesse to translate his intentions (Cunha, 2000) and Joseph Conrad instructing André Gide to faithfully capture his idiomatic style (Hersant, 2017).

In the context of a master's seminar focused on teaching, learning, and practicing the translation of literary texts, a successful experiment was conducted involving an international virtual exchange between students of creative writing and literary translation. This initiative proved to be fruitful and insightful, as demonstrated by a selection of examples gathered from the experience and presented in the following project design.

#### **4. Project design**

The practice here described gave literary translation students the opportunity to communicate and work directly with the authors, translating new and unpublished texts such as short stories, flash fiction prose or poetry. Under the supervision of an instructor, these translations were refined and perfected. Translating fiction and poetry means to solve ambiguities, metaphors, idioms, register and style. Working directly with the author emerged as a particularly effective solution – sometimes the primary solution – to address the challenges encountered by translators.

Under the supervision of both teachers collaborating, students were paired in international teams for one semester:

**Table 1.**

Creative Writing Class(fiction and poetry)	↔	Literary Translation Class
(USA)	↔	(Portugal)
One writer	↔	One Translator
Creative Writing Student (CRS)	↔	Translation Student (TS)

Unlike some well-known cases involving canonical writers and distinguished translators who corresponded through letters (Hersant, 2017), the students in this practice communicated via email, including both instructors in the correspondence to provide them access to the exchange and the development of questions and answers. Once the translation was completed, the students were asked to write a final report documenting their experience. Consequently, they collected a significant amount of data regarding the efficiency of this virtual exchange and the problems encountered and shared between the author and translator.

One of the purposes of collaboration is to help the translators improve their translation. That does not mean that the author owns the text or the intention of the text. Students should also approach the subject of intentionality, also learned in literary theory. In fact, Hersant (2017) posed some real-life examples when there were disagreements between writer and translator, as some authors are very keen on authorial intention, being sometimes very imposing and he wondered “whether authors’ participation in the translation of their own texts is indeed useful, or even desirable” (p. 105).

Interacting with the writer is undoubtedly an important tool and resource for the translation of literary texts. “For especially vexing items, consult the author. [...] Determine the authorial voice. This will affect virtually every choice in the thousands of words to be translated. Note any shifts in tone from one part of text to another.” (Landers, 2001, p. 45). Landers further added that “one of the most crucial aspects of literary translation can be the translator’s relationship with the SL author.” (p. 81) Living authors may help when the translator must address issues of connotations, regionalisms, dialect, cultural expressions, allusions, intertextualities, register and tone, or even idiolect.

## 5. Discussion of outcomes

In general, all the students were engaged and motivated, as it was a new experience for writers and translators alike. Writing about author-translator collaborations, Hersant (2017) declared: “The richest exchange, [...] and the one most likely to affect the final outcome, [...] most often occurs during

the translation process, and as difficulties are encountered, when the translated material presents a maximum of plasticity. Hersant emphasizes the importance of questions, citing Italo Calvino: “I strongly believe in collaboration between the author and translator. Rather than a revision of the translation by the author, this collaboration emerges out of the translator’s questions to the author” (Italo Calvino, 2002, as cited in Hersant, 2017, p. 93).

Both sides benefited from virtual exchange and questions/answer methodology. This pedagogical approach was very enriching for Translation Students (TS) and for Creative Writing Students (CRS) as well. After being questioned by TS, some CRS found new meanings, new possibilities in their own writing, or even a lack of meaning. The questions they received led them to reflect on their work, to discover meanings or intentions that were not clear to them when they wrote the piece, and to understand their original work on a deeper level.

This happened with the author of the poem *July*, who sometimes had no definite answer to the questions posed. This CRS, for example, had never thought about gender, an essential and explicit feature in the target language. The author only defined the lyrical subject in his poem after the TS’s question:

- TS: I’ve been working on your poem and, as I imagined, the translation is not easy at all. Therefore, I would like to make some questions. You may not realize, but in Portuguese, the adjectives vary in gender. So, is your poetic person speaking as a woman or a man?
- CRS: I guess I wasn’t necessarily thinking of it being from the point of view of either a male or female. Does Portuguese have a neutral tense? If not, I think the perspective of a woman will be okay.

Collaborating with the authors proved highly valuable and beneficial for the translators. Their inquiries focused on recurring translation challenges, such as connotations, hidden meanings, semantic and stylistic complexities, grammatical gender, morphological differences between the two languages, culture-specific references, specialised vocabulary, idioms, register and tone, style and naturalness, distinctions between British and American English lexicon, children’s language, titles, dialect, colloquialisms, and idiolect. This collaboration yielded a substantial amount of data and findings. Some of the questions and answers were shared in class, leading to discussions about strategies and solutions, which were subsequently presented in the students’ final reports.



Below is an example concerning a key morphological difference between the two languages in the context of a short story:

- TS: What is the meaning of “coming back too soon”? And who and to what comes it back?
- CRS: I guess what I mean by that is it returns before it is welcome, or just that it comes back without time to recover. Does that help?
- TS: When you speak of “selflessly painting sunsets of vibrant magenta”, is the poetic person painting sunsets intentionally or could he/she be painting something else? Is he/she painting at random or specifically sunsets?
- CRS: The concept behind that phrase was how on a very humid night the sunset always tends to be extremely beautiful with a bright array of colours. Nothing is being literally painted, I do not know if that helps at all. Let me know if you want me to come up with an alternative phrase.
- TS: When you say, “presuming emptiness”, could it be in the sense of pretending, or disguising? I think it would sound better in Portuguese.
- CRS: Yeah, I think disguising or pretending would work just fine!
- TS: Who has “little concept of self”? The sunset or the poetic person?”
- CRS: And it’s kind of difficult, a metaphor using the sunset but in reference to the “poetic person” ... so I guess use the sunset?

In problems that involve idiolects, for example, virtual exchange was a fundamental resource to “bring into the light” the process of translation or the translation in the making (Hersant, 2017), as the following example shows:

- TS: *The commonry was simplistic and a strict routine in the quiet household.*  
I tried to find the meaning of the word “commonry”, but I found nothing. Is it a typo? If not, could you give me a synonym, please?
- CRS: This is an unfortunate pick-up from my family’s diction. It actually means nothing in the English language. I was going for something loosely synonymous with “chore”, but in a more softened sense.

The insights brought by the author concerning the translator’s reading and interpretation of the text can contribute to translation decisions in the process. However, as mentioned above regarding recognized and canonical authors and translators, collaboration can be either smooth or difficult.

Living authors can answer some kinds of questions that no one else can, but no solutions can “close” a work or prove definitive. Authors are indispensable in addressing questions of denotation, allusion, regionalism, intertextualities with their other works, roman à clef “insider information,” archival parallel texts, and other matters of historical or text-production specificity. (Washbourne, 2016, p. 113)

In general, the author does not have the final word about the transfer of meaning in the process of translation: “The author is one source among many, and it is the professional, experienced translator who is calling the shots” (Bush, 1997, p. 118).

Translation is a process of personal negotiation, not necessarily with the author, but most certainly with the text. The aim of the virtual exchange project was to maintain a collaborative and insightful dialogue between both parties. Thus, what emerged from the communication between the students, and what the translators generally expressed, was that they received recommendations rather than impositions from the author.

## 6. Conclusions

The collaborative experience between TS and CRS not only provided valuable insights but also proved to be enriching for both students and instructors, fostering cooperative relationships, and preparing students for international interactions. The hands-on nature of the exchange offered a practical, learning-by-doing experience, closely resembling the challenges of professional translation in this field. Such online collaboration is a common practice among contemporary authors but rarely feasible in translation classes, which is why this report is ground-breaking.

Teachers and students expressed a positive assessment of the project’s outcomes. In the context of literary text translation classes, this virtual exchange introduced new perspectives in the theory and practice of literary translation, emerged as an innovative teaching method, potentially becoming a key aspect of the program’s content. This practice might be extended to undergraduate classes when the number of students is not excessive, allowing a balanced exchange with the CRS.

This inter-university international project allowed different challenging practices in class, such as the integration of an international learning environment and online collaboration with other students. It increased class dynamism, improved the students’ self-knowledge, reflected a growing interest

for exchange in progress and encouraged the writing of a final report. It also motivated the development of various other skills, such as communication, language, working in international teams, mediation between different cultures and languages, autonomy, and time management.

The virtual exchange described here played a crucial role in showcasing effective educational practices and introduced new perspectives on approaching the theory and practice of literary translation. It provided students with the opportunity to analyse previously untranslated texts, solve problems through communication with authors, and contribute to the development of their translation competence and negotiation skills. Discussing the process in class, sharing achieved results, and involving other students as peer reviewers created a new learning experience for literary text translation.

Accessing resources or information directly from writers through virtual exchange and collaborative translation is playing an increasingly significant role in the realm of professional translation. This report analysed the perceptions of a group of translation students regarding these new practices in the classroom. Engaging in collaborative translation tasks online not only motivates students but also reinforces their understanding of specific literary challenges, cultural differences, and contexts. Integrating virtual exchange into literary translation classes offers students a broader perspective and prepares them for the globalized and digital nature of the profession. Furthermore, it encourages them to collaborate on translations in future professional endeavours.

As is the case in this practice report, the integration of virtual exchange into literary translation classes offers students a broader perspective, exposes them to diverse linguistic challenges, and cultivates essential cross-cultural communication skills. This approach aligns with the increasingly global and interconnected nature of the literary translation profession.

In summary, the experience of translating literary texts and collaborating online through virtual exchange highlights the significance of communication, cultural awareness, and adaptability. It also emphasizes the potential insights for other professionals in the field of translation teaching who aim to enhance collaborative translation efforts in a globalized and digital environment.

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