

Why Professional Development? Reflections on Renewal Through Continuing Education

By Memuna Williams

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In his bestselling business and self-help book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey writes about seven habits which work together to make a person truly effective. The seventh of those habits is taking time for renewal, or, as Covey refers to it, “sharpening the saw.” (He takes this phrase from an analogy of a person who has been sawing a tree for hours and is exhausted, but won’t stop to sharpen the dull saw to make the job go more quickly because he is too busy sawing!) Covey strongly advocates taking time for professional renewal at different levels. He believes there are four dimensions for renewal: mental, spiritual, social, and physical (Ref. 1). Translators and interpreters will find Covey’s findings pertinent to their own professional growth.

There is a high propensity for the tools we use in our daily work to grow dull. It is all too easy to get caught up in the daily demands on our time and to consciously or unconsciously neglect to make time to keep our skills cutting-edge. Some of the reasons for the erosion of our competencies are provided here. Using three of Covey’s four dimensions for renewal (mental, spiritual, and social), I will explain how translators and interpreters can use this model to make the most of professional development opportunities. (The physical dimension is also important as part of the habits which Covey advocates, but will not be discussed in this article.) Professional renewal on these three levels can be achieved through formal and continuing education, reading, writing, giving back to our community, and socializing (Ref. 1).

Why Stop to “Sharpen the Saw?”

Our knowledge of various subjects grows rusty or outdated partly because of the relentless dynamism of our profession and that of the world around us. We need look no further than the daily paper or the news on what’s happening right now in our respective fields to discover some of the reasons we need to sharpen our skills and add to our knowledge base.

Nature of the Profession

We deal with language, culture, and different fields of knowledge, all of which are continually evolving. For instance, new terminology and usage frequently appear or are prescribed by various government bodies. A case in point is the French government’s endorsement of the term “*courriel*” for “e-mail,” which made headlines and sparked debate among linguists about whether the term would ever gain common acceptance. The accounting scandals at Enron, WorldCom, and Global Crossing have resulted in new laws being written, such as the Sarbanes-Oxley Act. New planets in our solar system are discovered, thus leading to discussions about, for example, “brown dwarfs.” Cultural references about an albatross around a person’s neck and business jargon (such as “walk the talk”) are used all the time. All of this terminology, and more, finds its way into the business correspondence, cases, articles, and other documents that land on our desks for translation. To be effective, translators and interpreters need to have the tools, resourcefulness, and discernment to know what to do when a translation solution is needed for any of these potential quagmires.

Changing Technology

In addition to evolving language, culture, and knowledge, language professionals face technological advances. To say that over the past 15 years computers have radically changed the way in which translation/interpretation is handled is an understated truism. For example, translating and editing with pen and paper are beyond old-fashioned today. Fax machines, which seemed like a necessary tool for translators just five years ago, can now go for months without being used. They are being replaced by the versatile Adobe PDF files that can be easily annotated, modified, and e-mailed back and forth. Advances in technology continue to increase our production capacity. To remain relevant in today’s technical world, we must keep up with the technology that is shaping the profession.

Nature of the Professionals

In North America today, we enter the translation and interpreting professions through different channels. Some people have studied in these areas and then join the work force, while others come into this line of work accidentally because they know another language. I’m of the unusual breed that fell into translation at the start of my university studies. After I was accepted to double major in French and English literature, my university’s translation department contacted me, because of my solid foundation in English and

French, to ask whether I would consider switching to their program. I agreed and received an education in translation. Some of us are professionals from other fields who know our technical specialties well, but need to learn more about the rules of translation and interpreting and the techniques to perform our jobs successfully. Some of us understand the art of translation and interpreting, but need to continue to build specific subject matter knowledge (Ref. 4). In all these cases, more training is required to compensate for the skills in language, culture, or subject matter that are lacking.

The Changing View of the Profession

In the U.S., translation and interpreting are just now emerging as organized professions. A significant change currently taking place within the industry has to do with professional qualifications. For example, ATA is requiring candidates for its certification exam in translation to show proof of education or experience in translation before the certification test can be taken, and is requiring continuing education as a condition for maintaining certification (Ref. 6).

Tools for Mental, Spiritual, and Social Renewal

Seasoned professionals and those new to the field of translation and interpreting can address all of the issues discussed above through a wide array of formal and informal mental, spiritual, and social renewal activities. The suggestions in this article provide ideas on places to go, things to do, and subjects to learn for one's ongoing education. Ideally, that education will provide a translator or interpreter with the requisite mastery of the source and target language and culture, along with the knowledge of the chosen subject area that is necessary to function effectively in the profession (Ref 3). Given the diverse backgrounds we bring to this industry, not every avenue and subject discussed may be right for all of us. Which educational activities to pursue will depend on each person's particular needs.

The Mental Realm

Formal education. Translators in North America can obtain formal training in translation and interpreting from over 40 graduate and undergraduate degree, certificate, and minor programs at over 30 institutions around the continent. The programs most often provide training from and into English, Spanish, French, and German. There are also programs that handle Russian, Italian, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean translation. The content of these programs vary depending on their intent and scope. Although there is variety among the programs, leaders in the field agree about what newcomers to these fields should be taught (Ref. 4). Here are a few suggestions based on my experience and on my review of the opinions of seasoned professionals.

The first set of subjects newcomers need to consider are those that allow them to master the source language (Ref 3). This means advancing beyond our fundamental strong knowledge of that language and solidifying our ability to analyze the language correctly, recognize its traps, identify figures of speech, and distinguish among language levels. We must also be well versed in the history and culture of the language (Ref 2). Intermediate to advanced classes covering the grammar, current events, and literature of the source language help to build these skills and enrich our understanding of the source culture.

Subjects that help translators and interpreters achieve a mastery of the target language are indispensable. This is especially important, since we must have an even better knowledge of the target language than of the source language (Ref 3). Accordingly, in addition to classes covering the grammar, current events, and literature of the target language, we should seek intermediate to advanced training to improve their written and oral skills in the target language. This type of training reinforces the rules of the language and techniques for economy and good style (Ref 2). For example, target-language study is excellent for helping translators produce a translation that reads as though it could have been written in the target language. In addition, such study provides a good foundation for translation editing and revision.

The skills learned and applied in language and literature classes are not just purely academic, but have real-world applications outside the areas of literature and literary translation. For example, consider ads for Novell that can currently be seen at the airport in Newark, New Jersey, one of which states that "ERP" is the sound a CIO makes when he finds out that someone has gained access to information they shouldn't have. How would you render this pun culturally relevant if entrusted with the translation? This is a real problem that confronted real translators who adapted the ads into European and Asian languages for Novell's international campaign.

We should also acquire skills that enable us to master our subject fields (Ref 3). Such skills can be divided into mastering the subject of translation or interpreting and mastering the subject being translated or interpreted. To develop an understanding of translation and interpreting, we should obtain an introduction to the techniques of these fields. For example, some of the questions translators need to take

into consideration include: What must be taken into consideration and what process does language go through when we start with “*Interdit de marcher sur le gazon*” in French and end up with “Keep off the grass” in English? This is called modulation, and is just one of the standard processes, in addition to transposition, borrowing, literal translation, and adaptation, that language can go through when it is being decoded and re-encoded (Ref. 5).

To build on these basic skills, translators can continue their study of the subject of translation through training in literary and technical translation (including such specialized subject areas as medical and computer-related translation) and adaptation. Literary translation and adaptation classes are a good place to join the debate over “free” versus “fair” translations, and to study the vexing issue of how to treat proper names (Ref. 3). A class in medical translation can serve as a venue for a comparative study of the type of writing styles used in the in the medical field in both the source and target language. When translating between English and French, for example, when should the technical term for a procedure or condition be used, and when will the layman’s term suffice?

An important point to remember as all this knowledge is collected is that there is never one formula that fits every situation. Translators and interpreters must think critically when faced with problems, and ask questions, including: What is the end use of this translation? Given the real time constraints that we face every day, is it practical to apply the *ideal* solution in this case?

In addition to core training, we should seek training in terminology, documentation, and computers and translation. Such training is needed to build the research, cataloguing, and computer skills so vital to our profession. Our work becomes much easier when the right research tools are available and we have the ability to find solutions with them quickly. For example, an organized terminology system or database is a boon to any translator who no longer has to think, “I know I’ve translated that before, but where can I find it?”

Newcomers with no experience or who are entering the profession through formal study should take advantage of practicums, internships, and cooperative work-study programs for the valuable exposure to learn through actual practice. Internships and work opportunities for students translators and interpreters are available at international agencies such as the UN or one of its bodies, through federal, state, or provincial government departments, or at translation agencies or the in-house translation departments of private companies.

Mastering the subject of our specialty area can be partly achieved by taking technical courses. True mastery of other subjects can be achieved through taking electives, minoring in another subject area, pursuing a double major, or undertaking a professional or graduate degree in another area of interest. My personal preference and recommendation for another area of specialization is business. For example, since most translators will eventually have to deal with marketing, organizational, and accounting issues, and will likely come across business information in documents that need to be translated, I think that every translator will find a business education course invaluable. Other possible areas for specialization are law, political science, public health, and engineering.

Continuing Education

Outside a formal program or classroom and in the world of work, translators and interpreters can continue to learn and refresh their existing knowledge base. One set of opportunities to take advantage of is the education sessions that are available at ATA’s Annual Conference and at the smaller one- to three-day seminars sponsored by ATA’s Professional Development Committee that are held throughout the year. Recent seminars have covered translation and entertainment, interpretation, and legal and medical translation. Professional Development Committee Chair Marian Greenfield characterizes the sessions held at the conferences and professional development seminars as unique opportunities to learn information that cannot easily be found elsewhere. Furthermore, in her opinion, these sessions provide continuing education opportunities for the reasons being discussed here.

Reading

Reading is one of the easiest ways to continue to learn. As professionals, we should keep up with current events and read *The New York Times*, *Business Week*, and other papers and periodicals and their equivalents in other languages. Most of these are currently easily accessible online. We should keep abreast of translation and other industry area news by reading translation journals and trade magazines. Additionally, we should make time to read classics in the source and target language that were not covered during formal training (Ref. 1).

Writing

Join the editorial committee of a translation journal that is published in your area or send articles to a magazine for publication. A few translation periodicals that can be investigated for writing opportunities include *Babel*, *Translation Review*, *Meta*, and *Circuit*. These are published by the International Federation of Translators, the American Literary Translators Association, the University of Montreal, and the Ordre des traducteurs, terminologues et interprètes agréés du Québec. The *ATA Chronicle* routinely provides an editorial calendar and submission guidelines in every issue, and many of ATA's regional chapters and language divisions publish newsletters. The styles of these publications run from scholarly to light-hearted. They contain columns dedicated to book reviews and humor, and cover subjects from client education to science and technology (Ref. 6). The variety of content makes it possible for almost anyone to find an outlet for their personality and writing style. Writing-related activities will help keep you aware of the subjects that are most important within the profession at a particular point in time, and provide opportunities to practice writing and research.

The Spiritual: Giving Back

Giving back to our professional community is a great way to contribute. Business owners can give back by making internships available to translation and interpreting students. Seasoned professionals can share their wisdom by teaching a class at their local program or leading an interactive class on the Internet. As mentioned above, another avenue for sharing is writing. All of these activities are mutually beneficial to the givers and receivers. Staying involved with these types of activities keeps us mentally engaged in thinking about our profession, and provides the benefit of our experience to others.

The Social Dimension: Staying Active Outside Work

Studying, working, and keeping abreast of what's going on in the profession is hard work. We should all take some time for a little bit of "play." At ATA's conferences, take full advantage of the wide range of networking opportunities available. Make time to meet with other professionals in your area and join your local ATA chapter or translation or interpreting association. Talking to people who share your interests can help spark ideas on the specific things you should be doing to enhance yourself as a professional.

Start Today

We have good reason and a wealth of opportunities to live Stephen Covey's Habit #7 of renewal. Covey's Habit #3, putting "first things first," can help each of us find time for this important activity in our lives. Doubtless, there are reasons and methods other than the ones I have provided here for practicing Habit #7 in our respective fields. Find your reason and method, and get started today.

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Pull-Quote:

"...It is all too easy to get caught up in the daily demands on our time and to consciously or unconsciously neglect to make time to keep our skills cutting-edge..."

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