

# Applying Agile Development to Translation Curriculum Renewal in Higher Education

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This article adapts principles from the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development” to considerations of translation curriculum renewal/development (Beck et al. 2001). These principles are *iterative process, stakeholder inclusion, personal and industry relevance, and response to change*. Curriculum development and curriculum renewal go hand in hand, since it makes little sense to develop a curriculum without also devising a plan for renewing it. Programs should decide how often they will seek to comprehensively review their curriculums, and they should implement policies that will endow their curriculum with personal and industry *relevance*. This *relevance* can only be achieved as translation programs view the curriculum renewal process as *iterative* and continual and as they prioritize *response to change* based on interactions between many different *stakeholders*: faculty, industry leaders, program graduates, and current students. These principles function best when applied in a centralized way that still allows faculty the power to be the drivers of change.

**Keywords:** *curriculum renewal, language industry, translator training, translator education, agile development*

## Introduction

Researchers interested in industry had shown in 2015 that the language industry had changed quickly and dramatically in the twenty-five years prior (Rodríguez-Castro 2015: 30). This transformation has only been augmented in the four years since then, spurred forward by surprising advances in machine translation (Dillinger 2019). Although some researchers' work from back in 2015 showed many language service providers (LSPs) to not use machine translation (MT) at all (Porro Rodriguez et al. 2017), the relatively recent advent of neural machine translation (NMT) has caused rapid changes in the market, inducing market researchers to make such pronouncements as “By the End of 2017, Neural MT was Mainstream” (Slator 2018: 7). Although many LSPs may not be involved in pure MT, the horizon of increased post-editing in order to deal with ever increasing volumes—as well as novel integrations of translation technology—has market researchers predicting a future “boom in MT revenues” (Nimdzi). This is merely one example of how the industry has changed considerably. The point is, the language industry is at a disruptive moment of flux that is set to continue. Translation curriculum developers will need to take approaches that are far from traditional in order to continually and competently adapt to the changes at hand and, more importantly, the changes to come.

This paper proposes that curriculum designers adopt agile development principles in order to promptly and meaningfully respond to and predict market changes. We will outline and argue for four principles of agile development that can be brought into curriculum development/renewal. The process of curriculum development/renewal:

1. needs to be an **iterative process** that updates frequently;
2. must include a variety of **stakeholders**—including students, graduates, and industry leaders—in increasingly meaningful ways;

3. should favor **relevant curricula** over exhaustive coverage of the field;
4. should favor **response to change** over adherence to an overarching theme.

In presenting these principles, it is recognized that an expository coverage of a field of study, an overarching theme for a program, and the views of the instructor who is designing the curriculum are important, but relevance, response to change, and inclusion of stakeholders are considered *more important*. All of these principles have been borrowed and adapted from “The Manifesto for Agile Software Development” (Beck et al. 2001). This document was presented by a group of software developers who saw a better way to create products, and they were presenting it in opposition to previous, more sequential and rigid methods of product development. They too, saw value in some of the former paradigms of their field but sought to lend greater focus to other, more important principles (ibid).

While each item mentioned above will enjoy its own section dedicated to discussing the particularities of each principle, the principles of *iterative process* and *stakeholder inclusion* will be drawn upon heavily to illustrate the efficacy of the principles of *relevance* and *response to change*. Indeed, all these principles are interdependent and cannot effectively exist in isolation. For example, the whole point of including stakeholders is so that the curriculum can change and evolve on a frequent, regular basis, and both of these principles, in turn, ensure that—when the it does change—the translation curriculum is changing *in response to* actual or predicted movements in the language industry. All of these principles together help to provide students with *relevant* curricula (in the sense of industry relevance; this paper will also deal with factors of personal relevance, or relevance to a student’s interests and career goals). On that note, we will start our more detailed discussions of each principle with the principle of *iterative process*.

## Iterative Process

Translation studies programs can learn a great deal about the need to adapt to a changing industry from other fields. For example, engineering education scholars have identified what they call a “time lag dilemma” in their field; they explain that “the...‘standard curriculum renewal approach’ has not met shifting industry needs for engineers trained in sustainable development quickly enough (Desha et al. 2009: 184–5). They propose a methodology of “rapid curriculum renewal (RCR)” to address the time lag and place it in opposition to “standard curriculum renewal” (SCR) (ibid). These authors identify three phases in standard curriculum renewal: “Ad hoc exploration,” which might be independently driven by one or two faculty members; “flagship,” where the department might formally develop or redo “flagship courses” in order to address changes in the market; and “integration,” which they say is driven by the institution in that “new content” is put into place “across program offerings” (Desha et al. 2009: 188–9). They classify this process as “linear” and estimate that it typically takes 15–20 years for a curriculum to be renewed with this typical, naturally-occurring approach (ibid).

In looking at how these scholars describe the consequences of this standard approach to curriculum renewal, the parallels between education for a regulated industry like engineering and education for the language industry are surprisingly salient:

Institutions choosing to continue along the 15- to 20-year SCR path and wait for the rigorous proof and rationale for [new content] before acting faster, face a future risk that market and institutional changes might overtake their department’s curriculum renewal progress, causing their product (i.e. education) to fall behind employer demand (Desha et al. 2009: 189).

In order to avoid the pitfalls of SCR, they advise following an RCR process, which is characterized by a department that “has a high commitment to [new content]” and that “invests in condensing the curriculum renewal process to around” 8–12 years (Desha et al. 2009: 190). Now then, what from here is applicable to translation curriculum renewal? If we take the ‘curriculum renewal process’ to mean a complete review of all courses offered by a program, then 8 years is likely a goal that will be reachable only after concentrated investment and intense agreement/cooperation between faculty members. Engineering programs are likely much more centralized than most translation programs, which are often housed in humanities departments.

The operative principle we can take away from Desha et al.’s research is that, in order for RCR to occur, the department must be invested in RCR and must build an infrastructure that allows for innovation rather than reactions to “staff, market, or institutional drivers” (Desha et al. 2009: 190). This article, however, asserts that, while the focus of departments should be on enabling accurate predictions/innovations of the future landscape of the industry/discipline, it is still useful to place some eggs into the basket of student, graduate, and market opinions. And even though translation programs might be less centralized in how they develop their curriculum, program administration can still implement policies that, first, incentivize curriculum renewal; second, foment concerted exchanges of information amongst faculty; and third, deliberately place each faculty member into contact with their students’ and graduates’ opinions, as well as with industry leaders who actively function within the market. This will allow for efficient curriculum renewal that will more naturally occur from the bottom up, representative of what Peter Drucker calls ‘the new organization’ (1988). The first two of these important

implementations of policy will be further addressed under the section titled “Response to Change,” and the last will be addressed in the section titled “Stakeholder Inclusion.”

To further address the idea of *iterative process* with regards to translation curriculum renewal, let us look to one scholar within the field of translation studies: Moustafa Gabr. Gabr presented a model for curriculum development that begins with identifying the needs of the market as well as those of students (Gabr 2001). His model subsequently employs backwards design by defining the educational objectives that any course or program will address, with these objectives being built on industry/student needs (ibid). After creating lesson plans/materials and deciding on “evaluation instruments,” the designer or instructor will implement the course and seek feedback (Gabr 2001). What Gabr’s model does not include, however, is the explicit imperative that this feedback be used to redesign or *renew* the course. One of greatest benefits to live-taught courses is that they are not mere recordings or artifacts; they can change as long as the instructor wills it. Therein lies the key of this article’s argument.

John Kearns, who wrote his doctoral thesis on curriculum renewal in translator training, places some of the factors that influence curriculum renewal into two categories: “the reason for initiating curriculum renewal in the first place,” such as external reasons (e.g., Bologna Process) or internal reasons (e.g., newfound funding, new department chair, etc.) (Kearns 2006: 173). He further discusses some of the factors that can have an impact on whether a call for curriculum renewal is adopted by a program at large; for example, he cites how effectively the advantages of curriculum innovations might be communicated “to curriculum stakeholders” (ibid). These are valid considerations, but this article argues that departments need to make it their business to institutionalize, whether or not external reasons exist, internal reasons for curriculum renewal in the form of financial incentive. Money is an effective communicator and is an informative

indicator of an educational program's focus. Department administrators need to, first, mandate curriculum renewal from the top and, second, enable it from the bottom by offering financial incentives for collaborating with a variety of stakeholders in order to renew course offerings or revamp existing courses.

## **Stakeholder Inclusion**

Gabr concludes that curriculum development must proceed while taking into account the needs of three different entities: the market, the educational institution, and the students (Gabr 2007). As was mentioned above, it is crucial that the administration in the educational institution be invested in curriculum renewal. This article argues that administration is the key in making sure that their faculty enjoys contact with top-level language industry leaders and in making sure they have systematically collected data from program graduates. Translation programs need to actually hire language industry leaders as consultants in their programs. For example, faculty could have a biannual meeting with industry stakeholders where both parties can collaborate in order to review curriculum offerings as well as the focuses of each course. This would allow subjects or skills that are less relevant to give way to aptitudes that the evolving market is in higher demand of. If courses are renewed on a more frequent basis, then it might even make it a moot point to talk of complete curriculum renewal every decade or so. Smaller changes to the curriculum every two years or so would already solve the issue.

This approach, of course, is open to the criticism that it is reactive, as would be any greater consideration given to the opinions of students and program graduates. This paper's response to such an argument is twofold: first, if we pretend to prepare students for contribution to a real market—and recognize that they will of a necessity learn most of their more granular skills in the workplace anyway—then reacting to information gathered from industry leaders

isn't necessarily a negative practice; second, curriculum developers still need to remain free to exercise their own discretion once faced with suggestions made by industry stakeholders. Additionally, faculty could and should collaborate with language industry consultants on separate occasions for sole purpose of *predicting* the future landscape of the market. Such meetings might be held on a less frequent basis, such as every 5 or 7 years. It is also valuable to consult sources of language industry research, such as *Common Sense Advisory*, *Slator*, and *Nimdzi*. It can be noted, however, that predictive curriculum design is not devoid of problematicity either, and that is why it can even be seen as desirable to temper such an approach with a partially reactive approach. The principle of *iterative process* is fully capable of weeding out unhelpful curricular features down the road and replacing them with more relevant curricula, as long as the institution and its faculty are committed to agile change.

One elephant in the room is the highly variable requirements of different accreditation bodies, governments and the educational policies they bring to bear on higher education programs, and particular policies belonging to each institution. This article does not seek to specifically address any of these policies because what might apply, for example, in the United States could be unrealistic or even impossible in Europe. The aim of this proposed agile approach to curriculum development/renewal—although it does give possible examples of application—is not to prescribe specific strategies of how each educational program should interact with stakeholders but rather broad principles that such interaction and collaboration *should exist*. There is much room for creativity and adaptation, but it is a fundamental mistake to *not* include stakeholders.

Industry stakeholder inclusion provides a market-oriented foundation upon which to base curriculum development, and the more meaningful inclusion of graduates and students would



provide a learner-oriented foundation for curriculum development/renewal. If we at all pretend to assist in helping learners to develop as agents of their future careers, then a focus on the learner is essential (Washbourne 2014). There are many ways to pay lip service to learner centeredness (administering but not using course evaluations come to mind), but there are things programs can do besides a one-time survey at the end of a course that would be much more helpful (Washbourne 2014: 378). Student evaluations are currently used by and large to provide a measure of teaching effectiveness for instructors (Kulik 2001: 15), but this article would rather explore their potential use in determining subject matter, domains, or the focus(es) of a particular semester. For example, instructors can survey those enrolled in a course *before* the semester begins to determine what text types, domains, or topics they are most interested in (Sekta 2019). Similar surveys can be given as the semester progresses, once students have a better idea of the course objectives (this would be especially applicable to more introductory level students). Indeed, democratization of the learning environment is one of the current issues in education (Washbourne 2003). This would introduce a more short-term agile perspective to curriculum tailoring and would bring real action to the concept of learner centeredness. Data on and feedback from graduates could also be used in more meaningful ways, often in that it could be collected many years to a couple of decades after graduation, rather than just a few years. The next section will further address how *stakeholder inclusion* and *iterative process* could contribute to higher levels of industry/personal *relevance* in translation programs.

### **Relevance over ‘Coverage’**

There is so much potential material to ‘cover’ in any translation program that striving for exhaustive coverage of the field will surely result in a frenetic, discombobulated whirlwind that will leave students knowing very little about a lot of different things. It also runs the risk of

giving learners few opportunities for situated practice (Kiraly 2005) which, among other factors, will contribute to an educational experience that feels minimally relevant to students' personal interests and career goals. For this article, 'relevance' is understood in two ways: there is personal relevance, and there is industry relevance. Personal relevance is learner-focused and deals with students' varying interests and career goals. Industry relevance is market-focused and deals with the perceived needs of the language industry. For example, current research suggests that the needs of the market demand translation program graduates who have experience with a wide array of technical software tools (Rodríguez-Castro 2018: 355–8). We have already discussed some ways in which inclusion of stakeholders and an agile, iterative process can foster a translation program that better reflects current market landscape *as well as* the predicted future of the industry (consultation with industry leaders on a regular basis, regular review of curricula, etc.), and we have also talked about some ways that students can be more closely included in curricular decisions (prescreening for domains or text-types of interest, formative surveys regarding a course's subject matter, etc.). The opinion of this article is, however, that there is one key way that stakeholder inclusion can lead to maximized personal and industry relevance in a translation program: project-based learning.

Project-based learning (PBL) does not necessarily refer to learning the discipline of project management, though this can easily become, and most often is, an inevitable outcome of PBL. This paper uses the term PBL, in its strictest sense, to refer to what Kiraly calls "real *praxis*" (2005: 1103). This means that the students will interact with real clients and will perform work that will actually be published in order to satisfy an authentically occurring need; it is not equivalent to "simulated *practice*" (ibid). A simulated project is often referred to in the literature as PBL (e.g., see Rodríguez-Castro 2016: 151, footnote 2), so this paper will distinguish real

praxis from simulations by using the terms ‘true PBL’ and ‘authentic projects.’ True PBL, therefore, presupposes collaboration with, if not individuals who belong to the ‘language industry,’ at the very least individuals who belong to ‘an industry’ outside of pure academia. This inclusion of stakeholders of translation automatically endows a curriculum with industry relevance. Some might argue that not all projects are representative of the majority of what translation students might encounter post-graduation, but this is a risk well worth taking since an authentic project constitutes a learning experience that is representative of what students *did* encounter while working for a client who was *not* their professor and who truly *needed* a piping hot slice of intercultural communication.

Although true PBL does not guarantee that the learning experience will align with a learner’s core areas of personal relevance, this type of learning is much more likely to leave participants satisfied because it depends more on the students and less on the teacher, which is connected to higher levels of learner engagement (Washbourne 2014: 374). Students can see when an activity is authentic or not, and the majority of them likely have the same complaints of their programs as the industry into which they are graduating does: their training is not practical enough (Kiraly 2005: 1099). True PBL has more potential to solve the issue of industry relevance as well as the issue of personal relevance than any other translation learning methodology. Although for some projects an instructor could potentially act as project manager, many of the benefits of PBL come to students when they are allowed to plan the project themselves and see/oversee the entire process themselves from start to finish (Washbourne 2014; Rodríguez-Castro 2016: 152). Imagine published material on the resume of a graduating student, the product of a project they managed themselves; how could that student not be more likely to feel the personal relevance of impending employment? (Rodríguez-Castro 2016: 152).

True PBL necessitates application of the principle of iterative process—you just aren't allowed to recycle past projects, so new projects must constantly be drummed up—and it is therefore dependent upon a program's ability to engage in functional cooperation with industry partners. Hopefully we can now see how these principles—stakeholder inclusion, iterative process, relevance—are intertwined and codependent. Even sustained relationships with program graduates—the same type of stakeholder inclusion that could serve to indicate how well a program meaningfully prepared “agents of change,” turning graduates into industry leaders (Dunne 2019)—can lead to opportunities down the road for authentic projects. A commitment to true PBL is part of what is required in order to be committed to the principle of *response to change*.

## **Response to Change**

This principle is indeed what the entire agile methodology points to. An institution might have the most beautifully orchestrated and masterfully coordinated translation program imaginable, but if it hasn't changed in 10–20 years, if it hasn't kept up with the state of the field, it is automatically subpar. Students invariably notice when a program is outdated, especially when it comes to technology. Deriving from the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development,” it is exceedingly valuable to have a well-coordinated program with each course somehow relating to the other; it is far more important, however, to ensure that a translation program has responded to changes in industry (Beck et al. 2001). Programs are of course free to decide how they would apply this principle of response to change. For example, they could mandate curriculum renewal from above, they could incentivize curriculum renewal, they could systematize more meaningful feedback loops between faculty and industry leaders.

This article advocates more of a combination of various approaches, of which many examples have been given throughout the previous sections. It is a good idea to keep a program's curricular renewal eggs in many different baskets. Seek feedback from students—take it with a grain of salt, but do listen! Seek feedback from graduates—including past students who have now moved on to new status as industry stakeholders will proffer rich opportunities, not only for gathering data on the state of the market, but also to give current students true PBL experiences. Long-term data gathering from graduates will also shed light on the efficacy of a program in terms of employability. Provide regular venues for collaboration with industry leaders in order to review and improve the curriculum. All of the above entreaties are addressed to translation program administrators because such actions will only occur inconsistently unless they are centralized in the sense that the funds and infrastructure necessary for their realization are provided for faculty members.

Although these opportunities for stakeholder inclusion might be mandated from above, real change will mostly occur from the bottom up. Administration puts the framework into place and allows the specialists, the professors and instructors, to renew the curriculum. Back in the section titled “Iterative Process” (p. 5), it was suggested that administration also enact policies that incentivize curriculum renewal and foment concerted exchanges of information amongst faculty. Peter Drucker, a business organization scholar, considers “rewards, recognition, and career opportunities for specialists” as one of the most critical considerations in order to have an organization that functions from the bottom up (Drucker 1988: 50). However a program might implement this, the operative assertion here is that incentives for curriculum renewal need to be financial, they need to be regular, and they need to be of the appropriate magnitude.

Thinking of information exchange amongst faculty, curriculum renewal could even become a highly collaborative process. Whatever the channels might be, programs need to have meaningful ways of exchanging information. For example, peer observation and feedback could become a more regular phenomenon. Looking to teaching methodology, programs could think about hiring instructional coaches or collaborating more often with scholars/students who study education (Stes et al. 2010). These are measures regularly undertaken by primary and secondary schools. The notion that a PhD automatically endows one with effective teaching practices is outdated and invalid. The most important consideration, however, is that of information exchange amongst translation faculty in order to respond to translation industry changes. A faculty that does not talk to each other is indicative of a program that is dying. All of these measures—orchestrated stakeholder inclusion (industry leaders, students, graduates), financially incentivized curricular renewal, and faculty information exchange—are crucial to actively responding to, and predicting, changes in the language industry.

## **Conclusion**

To recap, this article has adapted principles from the “Manifesto for Agile Software Development” to considerations of translation curriculum renewal/development (Beck et al. 2001). These principles are *iterative process*, *stakeholder inclusion*, *personal and industry relevance*, and *response to change*. Curriculum development and curriculum renewal go hand in hand, since it makes little sense to develop a curriculum without also devising a plan for renewing it. Programs should decide how often they will seek to comprehensively review their curriculums, and they should implement policies that will endow their curriculum with personal and industry *relevance*. This *relevance* can only be achieved as translation programs view the curriculum renewal process as *iterative* and continual and as they prioritize *response to change*

based on interactions between many different *stakeholders*: faculty, industry leaders, program graduates, and students. These principles will function best when applied in a centralized way that still gives faculty the power to be the drivers of change; they are applicable whether a program is focused on interpreting, localization, literary translation, project management, audiovisual translation, etc. The language industry has changed drastically in the last three decades (Rodríguez-Castro 2016: 149–50), and those educational programs that choose not to ‘go agile’ will be left behind.

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