Students often view the making of poems as a two-step process: writing and revising. Writing, they say, is the generative stage. Writing is free-spirited, creative, personal, and enjoyable unless the muse is withholding in which case writing can be supremely frustrating. Writing is somewhat mystical in that it depends upon imagination and inspiration, two difficult-to-define and difficult-to-control forces. Many students believe that writing (both the process and the product) can't or shouldn't be judged by others; writing is an expression of the self and is highly subjective.

Everything other than writing, according to this dichotomous model, falls under the rubric of revision, the process by which one perfects the poem. Revision is hard work, often boring, but necessary in order to garner a positive evaluation from others. Revision is an intellectual rather than creative endeavor, a necessary undertaking that is, by nature, antithetical to the spirit of poetry.

I find it useful to question and complicate this dichotomy and these terms. First, I suggest we limit writing to its more literal sense: the action of forming letters, symbols, or words on a page. I suggest that we call what students are doing when inspired to employ their imaginations translating. Students are translating experience into language. Translation is an attempt to render something in another medium or to convey or transfer something from one person, place, time, or condition to another; or as Willis Barnstone more elegantly put it, “Translation is the art of revelation. It makes the unknown known.” It is helpful to think of making poems as more similar to painting or dancing than to writing an essay. How does a painter make the unknown known? How does the poet make experience known?

Then, there is re-vision. I add the hyphen to distinguish this process from the more traditional sense of revision which, for most students, is a synonym for editing. Re-visions are also an act of translation. Re-visions are homolinguistic (English to English) translations of poems, which are translations of experience. The process of re-visions is as exciting and ex-
acting as one's initial translation. The result of re-vision is not a polished poem or a fixed poem but a new translation, a new poem.

These are semantic distinctions, but I find that using new terms for the process of making poems can really open things up in the classroom. Describing writing as translation allows us to do away with the notion that some writing is immune to criticism. A poet is free to keep her poems private, of course, but even when writing for one's self, a translator is responsible for how accurately her language and images describe or enact the experience she is translating. A poet is responsible to his/her experience the way a translator is responsible to his/her original text. Also, by making writing and revising equally important and by describing both as acts of translation, we reanimate the process of re-vision and invite endless possibilities for play and experimentation.

I often ask students to write multiple, radical re-visions of a single poem. The result will be several poems that may not seem to have anything in common but are each translations of the original experience, which is anything the student has personally encountered, undergone, or lived through (including fantasies, dreams, thoughts, feelings, and direct observations). Translations may be undertaken with specific aims; perhaps the student wants to translate the poem for greater accuracy, more images, toward a highbrow or lowbrow diction. Perhaps the student wants to translate the content of the poem into a different form or different genre. Perhaps the student wants to play with a mechanical technique like a cut-up or fold-in or substitutions. One re-vision might aim for the feeling of a word-by-word or direct translation that strives for greater and greater representational accuracy in the language. Or, on the other end of the spectrum, students might experiment with homophonic translations (substituting words for other words that sound like the original words in the poem). A student might try a "lost text" translation where they pretend to have lost the original text and write the translation without it or translate the poem by trying to be extremely accurate to the form of the poem while paying no attention at all to the content.

These kinds of re-vision are not about fixing a poem. I ask students to try re-visions that privilege the uneven spots, the places one's sock would snag if walking over the surface of the poem. I suggest re-visions in which one excavates the poem, searching the poem-site for signs of life, unearthing broken shards, and examining them from all sides. I urge students to be as creative and radical as possible in their re-vision practice. Translate your own poem as if you know absolutely nothing about the time, culture,
or context of its origin. Translate a poem written by another student in the class. Translate the poems of your favorite poets. Once you get going, it's hard to stop.

When translating a poem from one language to another the translator needs to pay close attention and have empathy. Paying attention and developing and practicing empathy are essential to writing and living well. By thinking of all poems as translations of experience or as translations of other poems, I help students develop these vital skills and habits.

NOTES
2. See Charles Bernstein's list of experiments for more re-vision ideas: http://writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html.