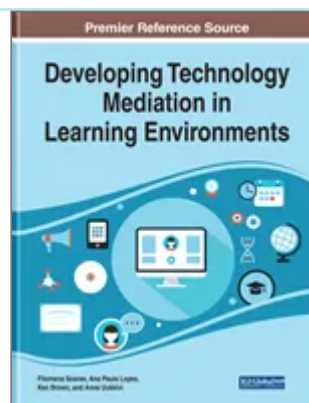


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Cultural Awareness and Distance Communication: A Project-Based Intervention in Higher Education Environments

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Abstract

This chapter reflects upon technology-mediated projects used to discuss and foster cultural awareness and proposes a methodology to be implemented in international, educational environments where communication could easily be hindered by cultural dissimilarities leading to conflict. More specifically, it seeks to answer two main questions, namely, whether technology is an aid or an obstacle in effective communication between students that never meet face-to-face and which obstacles, generated by technology-mediated communication in virtual teams, affect the intended outcome and how. These questions were raised during the participation of the authors of the chapter over a number of years in the Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project, where the complex process of learning-by-doing was achieved through peer interaction and the completion of realistic collaborative activities performed by North American and Portuguese students, prospect technical writers, and translators, respectively.

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Introduction

This chapter aims at reflecting upon technology-mediated projects used to discuss and foster cultural awareness and proposes a methodology to be implemented in international, educational environments where communication could easily be hindered by cultural dissimilarities leading to conflict. More specifically, it seeks to answer two main questions, namely, whether technology is an aid or an obstacle in effective communication between students that never meet face-to-face and, which obstacles, generated

by technology-mediated communication in virtual teams, affect the intended outcome and how. These questions were raised during the participation of the authors of the present chapter, over a number of years, in the Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (henceforth TAPP), where the complex process of learning-by-doing was achieved through peer interaction and the completion of realistic collaborative activities performed by North American and Portuguese students, prospect technical writers and translators respectively.

The Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project is a learning-by-doing network that brings together North American students enrolled in technical communication and/or technical writing courses and students from different European countries studying translation in undergraduate programs. This project, launched in 2000 by Professor Bruce Maylath and Professor Sonia Vandepitte¹, intended to aggregate different academic, linguistic and cultural backgrounds in one common educational context. Over time, the TAPP project became the largest and most complex international learning-by-doing educational network involving a large community of participants from different countries such as the USA, Belgium, Greece, Finland, Spain, Italy and Portugal. Its most relevant activities were gradually launched in three phases, namely, the bilateral writing-translation projects (2000), the bilateral translation-editing projects (since 2001) and the multilateral projects (since 2010). In 2014, the network added an additional phase of usability testing to complement the traditional writing and translation tasks.

Currently, the project includes over ten European and North American universities and tackles issues such as distance communication, cultural difficulties and the use of teams as a means to develop complex educational networks (Maylath & Thrush, 2000; Maylath, King & Arnó, 2013A; Maylath, Vandepitte, Minacori, Isohella, Moustén & Humbley, 2013B; Moustén, Vandepitte & Maylath, 2008; Moustén, Humbley, Maylath and Vandepitte, 2012; Moustén, Vandepitte, Arnó and Maylath, 2018; Vandepitte, Maylath, Moustén, Minacori & Scarpa, 2010; Vandepitte, 2015). TAPP aims at bridging the gap between technical writing and translation training at university level, by giving students from different multicultural settings the opportunity to learn from each other: technical writing students send their overseas counterparts the documents they create in class. European translator trainees translate the documents received and send them back to the technical writers with comments regarding text clarity and usability. In doing so, students become aware of the cultural diversity of the world and, at the same time, develop technical and interpersonal skills through collaborative technology-mediated communication.

For the purpose of answering the questions whether technology affects communication at a distance and in what ways, the present chapter is divided into three main parts. In the background section, the TAPP project is described and it is explained why this learning-by-doing environment is a suitable resource in translator training. Following, technology-mediated communication is contextualized. In section 2, the implementation of the TAPP project in the academic year 2018-2019 is presented in detail. In the description of the case study, communication between instructors and between students and instructors is analyzed in detail. Drawing on the analysis of the case study, we present our findings and conclude by addressing the questions raised.

Key Terms in this Chapter

Technology-Mediated Communication (/dictionary/technology-mediated-communication/83838): Communication that is electronically mediated, as opposed to face-to-face communication. It is carried out by information communication technology.

Learning-by-Doing (/dictionary/learning-by-doing/41491): A process that presupposes gaining knowledge through experience and the completion of tasks.

Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (/dictionary/trans-atlantic--pacific-project/83839): An international educational network, launched in the early 2000s, that connects classes in writing, usability testing and translation across borders and cultures, involving more than 40 universities. Participants carry out the projects in collaborative technology-mediated environments.

Cultural Awareness (/dictionary/cultural-awareness/6366): A term used to indicate consciousness of different cultural values, beliefs and behaviors, as well as the cultural expectations of others.

Virtual Teams (/dictionary/virtual-teams/31817): A group of individuals working for a common goal from different physical locations, who interact by means of electronic means of communication. Also known as remote teams.

Collaborative Environments (/dictionary/collaborative-environments/83837): Remote communication media that allow two or more participants to communicate and collaborate in the pursuit of a shared objective.

Translator Training (/dictionary/translator-training/83840): The acquisition of skills and knowledge necessary to achieve translation competence. Linguistic, translation, technical, interpersonal and service provision skills and knowledge are considered as the main areas of competence.

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