Chapter 2
Co-Writing and Cross-Cultural Networking: An Experiential Learning Case Study

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ABSTRACT
This chapter is a teaching case study which draws on Kolb’s experiential learning model and Latour’s Actor-Network theory, specifically, the ideas of learning as a process rather than as an outcome and of technological space as a cross-cultural network actor. The authors report on a collaboration between undergraduate-level students at a US university and graduate-level students at a Russian university within the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project originated to set up international academic collaborations. The chapter provides a theoretically grounded description of the project’s successes and failures as well as guidance for teachers wishing to use experiential learning through networking as an instruction tool.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter, like many others in this volume, describes the pairing of students to work together on the assignments offered by their instructors under the auspices of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP), described in the volume’s introduction. In particular, this chapter is devoted to describing the development of students’ writing skills as they engage in a TAPP collaboration. This particular project and the phase it describes draws particularly on TAPP methods covered in such publications as Humbley, Maylath, Mousten, Vandepitte, and Veisblat (2005); Maylath, Vandepitte, and Mousten (2008); Mousten, Humbley, Maylath, and Vandepitte (2012). Together, they represent a range of designs and objectives within the TAPP.

The collaboration was between undergraduate-level students at a US university and graduate-level students at a Russian university. The former was enrolled in Communication in Business and Industry, a
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course at Western New Mexico University (WNMU), while the latter were enrolled Translator’s Creative Laboratory, a course at Bashkir State University (BSU). Both classes concentrated, among other things, on document drafting and usability testing, which provided a logistics problem to be worked through as a team. In what follows, we offer a theoretically grounded description of the project successes and failures, as well as guidance for teachers wishing to use experiential learning through networking as an instruction tool. As a teaching case, rather than a research report, our primary focus is on the students’ activities and processes. We follow with recommendations for instructors wishing to undertake a similar project.

The importance of this project to Russian students increases in the light of the fact that writing programs either do not exist (as at Bashkir State University) or have been inaugurated only recently. The fall of the Iron Curtain almost three decades ago revealed the inadequacy of foreign language instruction, leaving it unable to respond to the demands of the new time because writing was not a part of the academic curriculum. As Dr. Korotkina (2014), one of the pioneers of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Russia, referred to the situation in the late 1990s, very often students were unaware of “what is thought to be the basics of academic writing” (p. 1). It took some time for the situation to improve. According to Chuikova (2015), “In Russia teaching writing aspects of EAP has started developing gradually since 2004” (p. 174). The EAP development was motivated by the increasing involvement of Russia in the international economy. The advancement was particularly significant when writing was made an essential part of the high school state examination. However, compared to writing programs in America, Russian writing curricula remain weak. Therefore, for Russian students, this project was also an elaborate introduction to writing different document types and thereby reinforcing their writing proficiency.

The importance of this project to students at an open-enrollment institution in the US is notable in that the educational and cultural backgrounds of the students are varied, meaning that not all students have the same writing skills as others, despite English being their native language. As addressed from a theoretical perspective in the “background” section, the collaborative learning-while-doing approach was vital for both BSU and WNMU students. This chapter provides the background of some theories of collaborative and experiential learning, a teaching case involving students at BSU and WNMU, including a detailed account of the technology and assignments used in the project, some issues involving communication, student response to the project, and some guidance for teachers who might wish to undergo a similar project.

BACKGROUND

“Collaboration,” as opposed to “cooperation,” refers in this case to two different but integrated processes: 1) the co-writing of documents and 2) the processes and technologies used to produce such documents. Whereas the term “cooperation” indicates a dual agreement, “collaboration” requires process and product, and there might not be agreement at all times. Kolb’s experiential learning model and Latour’s Actor-Network theory address these distinctions, specifically, the ideas of learning as a process rather than an outcome and of technological space as a cross-cultural network actor. The educational and cultural effect of writing instruction has long been highlighted by scholars of multiple disciplines, including renowned psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1979). Vygotsky argued for the importance of reading and writing as mediating activities accelerating development in children, which is not limited to motor skills only but also extends to their cultural development. In his book Mind and Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes, the scholar referred to prior experiments and schools, such as by Hetzer and