Chapter 3
A Multi-Faceted Global Virtual Team Project Linking Tech Comm Education in the U.S. and France

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ABSTRACT
The authors of this chapter report on a multi-faceted, technical communication project and what U.S. and French professors learned about designing similar projects and about what students find most important. The project challenged students to write in unfamiliar genres, to collaborate with students in another culture, to better understand the field of technical communication in another country (practice and education), to edit the writing of non-native speakers of English, and to increase understanding of international technical communication. Students provided reflections that explored their return on experience. This chapter includes pedagogical foundations, challenges, and recommendations as well as instructional materials for designing such a project.

INTRODUCTION
Virtual teams, particularly international teams, can open opportunities for learning in the classroom in ways that were impossible prior to the mass availability of information communication technologies (ICTs). Projects involving such teams can provide significant return on the investment of students and teachers. Increasing numbers of educators are taking advantage of this opportunity to open their classrooms to a real and diverse world as is apparent in the collection of articles in this book and the increasing number of publications on the topic of virtual teaming and teaching. For example, a number of articles have focused on the efficacy of using virtual teams to teach written communication (e.g., Brewer, 2016; DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4154-7.ch003
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Brewer, Mitchell, Sanders, Wallace, & Wood, 2015; Flammia, 2005, 2012; Flammia, Cleary, & Slattery, 2010; Sorensen, Hammer, & Maylath, 2015; Zemliansky, 2012). Recognizing the rich learning supported by virtual learning networks, the two professors who are reporting on the current project have used virtual team projects in their classrooms many times. In this chapter, they share a recently launched, multi-faceted classroom project and what they learned about designing similar projects—specifically what they learned about preparing such a project and about what students find most important.

For this collaboration, professors were most interested in exposing students to international education and the international workplace. This was a first experience for the 17 French students to work with U.S. students and also a first experience for the eight U.S. students to work with French students.

The professors designed an international virtual team project between students who were enrolled in an undergraduate course on technical communication (TC) based on an apprenticeship program at the University of Paris Diderot and students enrolled in an undergraduate international technical communication course at Mercer University in the U.S. (Mercer Paris Diderot Project, MPDP). Students used serial and concurrent collaboration to produce and edit a report on the apprentice model for technical communication education in France. The project challenged them to write in unfamiliar genres, to collaborate with students in another culture, to better understand the field of technical communication in another country (practice and education), to edit the writing of non-native speakers of English, and to increase understanding of international technical communication through return on experience. Additionally, students were to have the opportunity to improve written English for technical communication and gain competence working in virtual teams.

French students designed a document in English explaining their experience at university and in the companies where they work as apprentices. Students in this undergraduate program at Paris Diderot spend 21 weeks at university and 31 weeks in companies doing technical communication activities. For part of the year, students do two-week rotations between the university and the workplace. For part of the year, they work full-time in “their” companies. U.S. students, on the other hand, edited the documents for standard U.S. English and shared their university model that relies on full-time attendance at school for ¾ of the year with a full-time internship for ¼ of one year.

The project was structured such that each team of four to five Paris Diderot students performed in a team with two Mercer students. In the first phase of the project, professors prepared students for team work by explaining the importance of informal communication to the trust-building process. In the second phase, Paris Diderot students wrote their report after a brainstorm, whose purpose was to explain how the Paris Diderot program is intended to apply to the students’ backgrounds. Concurrently, Mercer students created an editing rubric based on standard U.S. English and on the direct organization of material that is preferred for Western audiences. In the third phase of the project, Mercer students applied that rubric in editing the documents produced by Paris Diderot students and discussed their edits with the Paris Diderot students. In the final phase of the project, students analyzed their experience in the project and reflected on what it might mean to them professionally.

Once students had completed their work, the professors analyzed the data collected from 1. the professors’ assessment of the Paris Diderot educational/professional reports, 2. the professors’ assessment of the Mercer editing reports, 3. the professors’ observations of students, and 4. student reflections. Based on all of these data sources, professors gained a sound understanding of how the project met or did not meet student learning outcomes and how the students perceived it. They are now prepared to implement changes in the project for next year, preserving and improving upon instruction and the associated learning outcomes that are most important to students.
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