Chapter 5
Making Sense of Virtual Collaboration Through Personal Learning Networks

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ABSTRACT
This chapter describes the use of personal learning networks (PLNs) in an online collaborative project involving technical communication students at the University of Minnesota and translation students at the University of Trieste. The authors, who acted as instructors at each end of the project, examined the PLNs produced by the students with the aim of making visible aspects of collaborative projects that have to date received less attention in the literature on both translator training and technical communication. More specifically, the analysis of PLNs – supported by a study of the exchanges that took place between the students in the course of the project – sheds some light on issues of cross-cultural competence, trust, and learning strategies and attitudes. These aspects were found to be characteristic of the students’ collaboration besides the obvious and more immediate focus on questions of language and translation.

INTRODUCTION

Today’s diverse and global workforce increasingly perform their work as part of global virtual teams (GVTs). GVTs are those teams connected via technology and composed of people in various locations around the globe. GVTs are most commonly language-diverse teams “composed of individuals who speak different mother tongues” (Kassis Henderson, 2005, p. 69). The primary objective of virtual collaboration is for a technology-mediated globally-dispersed work group to launch, develop, and complete its assigned task.

A 2016 survey of 1,372 respondents from 80 countries found corporate teams to be almost entirely virtual, with 41% never meeting in person (Trends in Global Virtual Teams). Even more significant is DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4154-7.ch005
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the finding that 48% of respondents indicated that over half of their teams include members from other countries. This percentage (48%) is up from 33% in 2012 and 41% in 2014. The survey points out that because of the ubiquity of virtual teams “team members may fail to recognize the challenge of working with culturally diverse colleagues, especially in a virtual setting… Survey participants indicated that in spite of the growing value, increasing importance, and frequency of virtual team meetings, culturally based challenges to effective collaboration and leadership continue to be significant obstacles” (p. 3). In fact, 68% of respondents reported that cultural challenges represented the biggest hurdle for GVTs. Therefore, virtual collaboration, and in this case, global virtual work, intensifies the need for members to develop intercultural competence.

As a means to develop intercultural competence, in this chapter, the authors report on one specific online collaboration project involving technical communication students at the University of Minnesota (UMN) in Minneapolis, USA, and translation students at the University of Trieste (UT), Italy. The project adopted the ‘standard’ format found in writing-translation collaborations within the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project, TAPP, (see the preface to this book): over one semester, UMN students prepared a set of instructions for a North American audience, conducted a usability test on the document with the help of UT students, and then finalized the same document for translation into Italian by the UT students. Unlike in other TAPP projects, however, students were not asked to produce pre- and post-learning reports but were assigned the task of producing visualizations of their “personal learning networks” (PLNs) at both the beginning and the end of the project.

A PLN visualization indicates the “collection of people, information resources, organizations, and other connections that networked individual values because the connections support and contribute to learning interests” (Duin & Moses, 2015, p. 30). A PLN is intended to enable participants to seek support for their learning, “to identify gaps in learning resources, and to discover culturally based assumptions about professional identity, knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, and the knowledge that they consider most worth having” (p. 30). The authors, who acted as instructors at each end of the project, examined the PLN visualizations produced by the students with the aim of making visible aspects of collaborative projects that have to date received less attention in the literature on both translator training and technical communication. The analysis of PLNs was supported by a study of the exchanges that took place between the students in the course of the project. The report on the study of student interactions and PLNs will touch upon issues of intercultural competence, trust, and learning strategies and attitudes – aspects that the authors found to be characteristic of the students’ collaboration besides the obvious and more immediate focus on questions of language and translation. Next, we provide detail regarding the theoretical framework, beginning with background on PLNs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

PLNs

Duin and Moses (2015) proposed the term intercultural connectivism as a means for reframing the academic conversation about the function of cultural dimensions as part of global virtual work:

“Intercultural denotes different cultures and social groups, and connectivism is the thesis that knowledge is distributed across a network of connections. Intercultural connectivism supports intercultural
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