Chapter 7
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

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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 Vandepitte, 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, Mousten & Humbley, 2013B; Mousten, Vandepitte & Maylath, 2008; Mousten, Humbley, Maylath and Vandepitte, 2012; Mousten, Vandepitte, Arnó and Maylath, 2018; Vandepitte, Maylath, Mousten, 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.