

Chapter 20

Communicating Pragmatics About Content and Culture in Virtually Mediated Educational Environments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the interactive communications of geographically distant virtual classrooms, connected via virtual aids ranging from e-mails to videoconferences. The combination is crucial: through diverse filters, virtual teams mediate a final text for a new language and culture. The authors use linguistic pragmatics as a mechanism to analyze and assess the efficiency and the meaningfulness of such communications. They then use this approach to recommend best practices for educators teaching in cross-cultural virtual environments.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter is based on the more-than-decade-long collaborative Trans-Atlantic Project between universities in France, Belgium, Denmark, and the USA. Adult students—mostly in their 20s but

some in their 30s and a few in their 40s—have engaged in virtual communication to work on a range of diverse, joint activities. These interactions have involved everything from simple e-mail communication to individual homepages and joint web-based platforms to entire online class video-

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conferences. The Trans-Atlantic Project usually involves students in technical and professional writing courses composing an instructional or procedural text for a North American audience. These students then rework this text for translation. Writers can take certain steps, such as eliminating idioms, to revise their original English-language text in a way that helps translators accurately render that text in another language.

In 1999, students in Bruce Maylath's Technical Writing course at the U.S.'s University of Wisconsin—Stout began an assignment exchange with students in Sonia Vandepitte's Essentials of Translation course at what was then known as Ghent College of Translation and Interpretation in Belgium. UW-Stout students e-mailed their instructions (which had been edited to facilitate translation) to students in Ghent. These Belgian students then tried their hand at translating this text into another language, and the students also noted where they were confused about the meaning or accuracy of the English-language text with which they were working. The Belgian students then sent their questions to the Stout students who were the original authors of the texts being translated. In response, the technical writing students provided clarification on these translation-related questions, and the translation students used this information to complete the translation of the original instructions. Once these translations were completed, the students in Ghent emailed them back to their Wisconsin – Stout counterparts so the original authors of the instructions could see what their materials looked like in Dutch. In 2000, Birthe Moustén's classes at Business and Social Sciences, Aarhus University, Denmark joined in this translation related-exchange that would soon come to be called the Trans-Atlantic Project. (Another international partner from Université Paris—Denis Diderot joined the group in 2003.)

Although considerable reflection has gone into the ways in which the Project can be set up and assessed (Humbley, Vandepitte, Maylath, Moustén, & Veisblat, 2005; Maylath, Moustén,

& Vandepitte, 2008; Moustén, Vandepitte, & Maylath, 2008; Moustén, Maylath, Vandepitte, & Humbley, 2010), attention to the specific advantages offered by virtual interaction and to the methods of getting the most out of them has been relatively slim. Authors who have brought some attention to the topic include Starke-Meyerring and Andrews, 2006; Herrington, 2008; Fitch, Kirby, and Greathouse Amador, 2008; McCool, 2008; Starke-Meyerring and Wilson, 2008; Starke-Meyerring, 2008; and Flammia, Cleary, and Slattery, 2010. Yet these authors often fail to note that while interaction is possible through virtual teams, virtuality also creates an exchange of cultural input—sometimes unconsciously—that would otherwise not have been possible or would have been exchanged in a different way in a face-to-face exchange. As observers like Olaniran (2008) have noted, the importance of working in virtual teams keeps growing in an increasingly globalized economy, and the problems related to this online intercultural communication have not diminished over the fifteen or so years that virtual teams have been operating in business. Thus, it would appear advisable to expose students to these new practices and incorporate them into their learning environments.

For this chapter, the authors have defined virtual teams as

1. Persons assembled to complete a specific project
2. Members who are functionally diverse
3. Members who depend on technology-mediated communications to connect with each other
4. Persons who are geographically dispersed

In prior publications, the authors have discussed different aspects of their virtual team collaboration, namely the set-up and cross-professional dynamics (Humbley et al., 2005; Maylath et al., 2008), pedagogical theories and practices (Moustén et al., 2008), and group dynamics with

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