

Chapter 21

Using the Cultural Challenges of Virtual Team Projects to Prepare Students for Global Citizenship

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ABSTRACT

Global citizens are those individuals who understand the complex and interdependent nature of the world and who take action to address global issues at a local level. Many faculty members recognize the need to prepare students for the demands of global work and citizenship. In this chapter, the author demonstrates how virtual team projects are an ideal means to help students develop global competency and offers suggestions for faculty seeking to structure projects geared to civic engagement.

INTRODUCTION

Global changes in society are occurring rapidly. Developments in telecommunications, computing, and transportation have increased the ease and frequency of communication among members of different cultures. Similarly, international trade agreements have opened up opportunities and new avenues of commerce. At the same time, the global marketplace is also influenced by developments

in international politics and the rise of e-commerce and multinational corporations. Trends in immigration and an increasing number of multinational corporations employing a globally distributed workforce have blurred the distinctions between national and cultural boundaries (Suárez-Orozco & Sattin, 2007). All of these changes have led to an increased need for effective communication to facilitate cooperation and collaboration among the peoples of the world. They have also led to

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-833-0.ch021

the rise of a new concept of citizenship: that of the global citizen. As a result, today's educators now recognize the need to prepare students for the challenges associated with such global citizenship.

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate how virtual team projects – projects in which students located in different nations use online media to collaborate – are an ideal means to help students develop global competency. For this reason, the author recommends that virtual team projects be more fully integrated into the curriculum of many different educational programs. In addressing this issue, the author demonstrates how virtual teaming can foster global competency and produce students who are actively engaged citizens. The author then concludes the chapter by offering suggestions educators can use for developing virtual team projects geared toward civic engagement.

GLOBAL EDUCATION AND THE TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION CURRICULUM

As the higher education curriculum becomes “internationalized,” faculty members across campus have sought ways to prepare students for citizenship in the twenty-first century. Faculty members in the field of technical communication – the author's own academic discipline – are no exception, and as a result, their experiences in addressing this issue can serve as an example for other disciplines. Like the members of many other fields, technical communication faculty agree that students need to be prepared for global work (DeVoss, Jasken, & Hayden, 2002; Giammona, 2004; Miles, 1997; Schafer, 2009; St.Amant, 2002b; Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006; Weiss, 1998). Reporting on a survey of global partnerships in technical communication programs, Starke-Meyerring, Duin, and Palvetzian (2007) argue that changes brought about by globalization call for the creation of learning environments to foster the develop-

ment of the skills students will need for today's workplace and for *global citizenship*. The key then is to understand what global citizenship means in order to develop educational approaches and opportunities to help students become effective citizens in the global age.

Hobbs and Chernotsky (2007) define global citizens as individuals who are skilled in intercultural communication, respectful of cultural differences, and aware of the complex and interdependent nature of the world. Global citizens are people who are aware of the relationship between global and local events. They are individuals who recognize their actions at a local level have the potential to affect international events (Stevens & Campbell, 2006).

To be prepared for the challenges of global citizenship, technical communication students – like students in most disciplines – need to understand how to communicate and collaborate with members of other cultures (Sapp, 2004). St.Amant (2002a) points out it is not enough to give students the opportunity to interact with individuals from other cultures. Rather, students must participate in structured activities that will allow them to communicate online with diverse others. Students also need to become skilled in using technology – particularly online communication technologies – for collaboration with global teammates. Additionally, today's students need to know how to develop shared understandings with team members from other cultures and how to work across both national and disciplinary boundaries (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006).

Like their peers in other fields, technical communication students also need to understand how to prepare documentation for global audiences and to write documentation that is translation ready (Maylath, 1997; Maylath & Thrush, 2000; Thrush, 2001; Weiss, 1998). They should be prepared to face the ethical and legal challenges of communication with global audiences (Dragga, 1999; St.Amant, 2001).

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