

Chapter 33

Budding Researchers in the Humanities: An Intercultural Online Project

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter aims at describing the networks within the Research and Development in Empirical Studies (REDES) Project, an intercultural enterprise aimed at promoting empirical studies of culture. Probably the first and only international project in the Humanities which prepares new researchers through on-line communication, the experience is believed to be scalable to other areas as it enables students to acquire the methodological techniques needed to undertake and carry out research in an environment totally different from the traditional university classroom. The chapter traces the history of the project from its foundation in 2002, explains in detail how it was set up, and evaluates the contributions of this joint effort. The problems met along the way are also pointed out. The chapter concludes with the challenges still to be faced. This case report stands as a proof of the impact of technology in preparing human resources for the Humanities.

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INTRODUCTION

Perhaps one of the most distinguishing aspects of human beings, one which has never changed and has enabled us to survive as a species, is our need to communicate and live in social groups. What has actually changed, however, is the way in which communication has been carried out. As we enter the 21st century, a new group of human beings, also known as the “Net Generation” (Baron & Maier, 2005), is on the make. These youngsters, born in many parts of the world after 1980s, have grown up with technology, which they have used for communication. Baron & Maier (2005, p. 57) describe them as “digitally literate; connected; social; prefer to working in groups; achievement oriented; require structure and guidelines; crave interactivity; have short attention spans; are experiential, visual, kinaesthetic learners; and prefer working on things that matter”. They also state that the Net Generation is representative of the population in all the universities around the world. Still, they are a large group, who, to some extent, are trying to show us that a new way of learning must find its way into the curriculum. Indeed, if one of the major goals of the university is to produce new knowledge, working online in a research community which goes beyond geographical boundaries is one of the most effective ways to prepare students to become budding researchers and thus effectively participate in the scientific knowledge production. It may be argued that the idea of research communities is not new and hence presents no innovation. However, roughly until the turn of this century, research groups depended on the physical presence of their members and were generally affiliated to a single university or to those within a similar geographical area. Nowadays, technology has opened the access to exchange which hardly knows space or time limitations. The Internet has made some aspects of research quicker, more economic and more accessible to all, especially to students. As Geer (2001) rightly

notes, there are still limitations but they may be of a cultural nature. She writes that:

Although as human beings, we communicate with others in many ways and across many mediums, communication is not always easy, even when we feel we know the other person. Cultural influences are often at the root of the communication challenge where misunderstandings and misinterpretations occur. Interaction and collaboration become much harder when communicating with total strangers in the online environment (p. 557).

It must be stressed, however, that before the Net Generation was born, scholars were already discussing the implementation of projects aimed at providing researchers in the Humanities with personal computers (Andersen, 1984) so as to facilitate communication among research groups. Fortunately, the world has moved beyond this stage. According to De Smedt (1999), “[t]he fact that students and staff have a computer on their desks instead of a pile of books is one visible change affecting the learning and teaching situation, even if it is a superficial one” (p. 2). Still, the way computers and their distance-learning advantages influence the process of producing and disseminating knowledge could be much different – from simply helping literature searches and storing information to full-scale research collaboration crossing the boundaries of classrooms, laboratories, libraries, universities, and countries.

This chapter aims at presenting a case study showing how to prepare new researchers in the Humanities through online communication. Relying on the Internet for about seven years, it has been possible to create a research group that works simultaneously in four different countries. Additionally, it has allowed the development of cross-cultural studies that would be impossible to carry out if students had to travel to all of the countries involved (Fisher & McGeeveran, 2006). The present chapter indicates in a sense that the

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