Chapter 7

Real–Time and Social Media in Trans–Atlantic Writing/ Translation and Translation/ Editing Projects

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ABSTRACT

This chapter illustrates the ways in which seemingly peripheral contact and communication via social networking are effective means by which members of international and intercultural Networked Knowledge Communities (NKCs) can, in largely informal ways, educate one another in terms of culture, custom, and language use. The authors argue that these increases in communication via new media have resulted in both successful writing/translation collaborations and, in many cases, satisfying long-term personal and professional relationships. To illustrate these claims, the authors draw from written student reflections collected in the last two years in the long-running Trans-Atlantic Project linking writing classes with translation classes. The reflections reveal that, in many ways, the informal, pseudo-immersive communication of new social media and real-time media can be even more effective than traditional pedagogical practices that rely largely on textbook-centered approaches to intercultural education, especially when carried out through a NKC.

INTRODUCTION

In the academic year 1999-2000, with e-mail having recently become commonplace among university students in both North America and Western Europe, Bruce Maylath and Sonia Vandepitte paired students in an international collaboration that would quickly spread to include universities in many countries and become known as the Trans-Atlantic Project, or TAP (Humbley, Maylath, Mousten, Vandepitte, & Veisblat, 2005). In its beginnings, the Project existed as a collabo-

ration between technical writing students at the University of Wisconsin—Stout and translation students at what was then called the Mercator College of Translation and Interpretation in Ghent, Belgium. In the years since, however, the project has expanded to encompass nine countries, dozens of instructors, and thousands of students. The project has grown not only in numbers; it now also connects students at different levels (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral students alike) and disciplinary affiliations (translation, engineering, architecture, medicine and health, humanities and social science fields). In other words, the Trans-Atlantic Project has helped to develop many highly successful and complex NKCs among instructors and students alike.

Not surprisingly, TAP has undergone some changes since its beginnings more than a decade ago, due to a number of factors. The critical factor that made TAP feasible in the first place was access to instant communication via the Internet. As email replaced airmail and then facsimile transmissions, it drastically changed the ways in which trans-Atlantic communication and collaboration could be carried out. More recently, the ubiquity of various social media, including Facebook, and real-time media, notably Skype, has again changed the ways in which students and instructors can (and do) communicate and collaborate with one another.

In this chapter, the two of us—Maylath, a founding member of TAP, and Hammer, a former student participant-turned-graduate instructor collaborating in TAP—outline recent pedagogical strategies surrounding the use of new media in the Trans-Atlantic Project and report findings from our own observations and students' written reflections of the experience. Discussion then focuses on how an increase in students' *virtual* face-to-face interactions (class-to-class video conferences and one-on-one Skype sessions) with their European colleagues added to the immediacy and sense of the reality of their audience and partnership. The

authors then suggest that the use of social media, especially Facebook, facilitated the exchange of cultural information between student collaborators, while the use of real-time media gave the projects more immediacy and made collaborators seem more real to each other. In summary, this chapter

- Advocates and rationalizes such engagement with new media communication technologies,
- Illustrates observations through the written reflections of both students and instructors, and
- Points to ways in which future iterations of the Trans-Atlantic Project, and other projects like it, might utilize various new media communicative technologies to create more productive and informative NKCs.

METHODS

We want to first clarify that this chapter is not meant to occupy a space within quantitative, generalizable research on the use of social media in the classroom. Nor do we focus on the impact of social media technologies on students' writing. Instead, we document the longitudinal use of various communicative media within a specific project and, drawing on written student reflections, discuss the ways in which emerging media have impacted students' experiences as well as our own pedagogical approaches to the TAP.

For purposes of this chapter, we drew from our observations as instructors in the TAP as well as American students' reflections from the last two years of one iteration of projects. Responses for this chapter came from American students enrolled in three upper-division writing courses at North Dakota State University: International Technical Writing, Writing in the Design Professions, and Writing in the Humanities and Social Sciences. We

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