"Scaffolding" revisited: How TAPP collaborations support learners and instructors from different disciplines and backgrounds

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Abstract

In social-constructivist approaches to learning, scaffolding is "the support offered by the teacher to assist learners in the collaborative construction of their mental models" (Kiraly 2000: 45). It is not "pre-determined support" and can take a variety of forms. It is like "the placing of helpful signposts on the path as the learners create it". It does not break down a task into components so as not to prevent learners from extracting meaning from the whole learning situation. In a collaborative project, scaffolding might also be seen as including the support that instructors offer to each other, especially when they come from different disciplines. In this paper, we provide an overview of the iterations of an online collaborative project within the Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (TAPP) network. In particular, we describe how over a five-year span we collaborated to re-adjust and fine-tune the project so as to learn more about each other's discipline and cater to the learning needs of two groups of students coming from programs with different educational focuses: one group (based at the University of Trieste, Italy) comprised students from a bachelor degree program on translation; the other group (based at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, U.S.A.) comprised (mainly graduate) students from a class on international professional communication. Based on our use of collaborative autoethnography, our overview discusses: 1) the ways in which we developed and re-adjusted our scaffolding strategies; and 2) the ways in which such scaffolding and online collaboration helped us, as instructors, make better sense of the cross-disciplinary nature of the students', and our, collaboration.

Keywords: *scaffolding, situated learning, collaborative projects, translation, technical communication*

Introduction

The Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (TAPP) framework has been offering students the possibility to engage in collaborative projects for well over a decade. Within the framework, groups of students have been made to collaborate who come from two main disciplinary areas: technical communication and translation. As a general rule,

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student groups being trained on technical communication are based in US universities, while students being trained on professional translation are enrolled in European universities. This reflects the emphasis given to the respective professions in the two geographical areas (Minacori & Veisblat, 2011): in the U.S., more attention is traditionally paid to academic programs aimed at educating technical communicators; in European countries, more emphasis is given to the training of professional translators. In TAPP projects, instructors supervising student groups are likely to come from one or the other discipline. This means that, just like students, they are often meant to negotiate disciplinary differences, bridge gaps, and find common ground as regards both course learning outcomes and more specific TAPP assignment design and outcomes.

Over the last few years, several contributions have shown that the roles of professional communicators and translators are converging (e.g., Minacori & Veisblat, 2011; Schubert, 2012; Gonzales & Turner, 2017). Some of these contributions stem from TAPP-related activities and have focused on various pedagogical implications of the collaborative projects that students from the two disciplines are involved in[1]. The aspects covered in these TAPP-related publications include: the role of (inter-)cultural awareness (Verzella 2017); peer feedback (Lisaité et al. 2016); the integration of usability testing (Isohella 2018); the role of technology in managing complexity (Maylath et al., 2013); and the use of English as a Lingua Franca in the communication among participating students (Arnó-Macià et al., 2019).

In this contribution we add a further perspective, and chart the evolution of the TAPP collaborations that we were iteratively involved in, as instructors, over a period of five years, from 2015 to 2020. The overview focuses on one particular element, i.e. "scaffolding", and illustrates how it was used by the authors to meet the challenges posed by the cross-disciplinary nature of the collaborations.

Theoretical background: Situated learning and scaffolding

Translator training is at its most effective when it is "situated" (Risku, 2002). In particular, we concur with Calvo (2015: 307) in considering translation situatedness as having to do with "the extent to which a specific translation proposal corresponds to a recognizable real-life translation scenario". More specifically, and again following Calvo (2015: 307), three different learning paradigms can be seen to be in play in relation to situated translation: constructivism, social constructivism, and situated cognition. Constructivism concerns how individuals interact with the environment and sees knowledge as developing from this interaction; social constructivism considers learning

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[1] See the comprehensive list of publications currently available at
https://www.ndsu.edu/english/transatlantic_and_pacific_translations/

as a collaborative process (see also Kiraly, 2000); situated cognition sees learning as emerging from realistic contexts.

TAPP project formats have the potential to enact all of these paradigms. Students are engaged in specific practical activities that offer a "learning by doing" experience (constructivism).

The strong collaborative element inherent in all projects forces students to interact with peers as well as instructors (social constructivism). Finally, the real-life scenarios replicated by some projects introduces realistic elements that enhance, and make more effective, the practical learning experience of students (situated cognition). In terms of collaboration effort, the three paradigms could be placed on a cline that moves from minimal to maximal collaboration, both among learners and among instructors. As the level of interaction and collaboration rises, it can be assumed that an increasing variety of signposts and guiding materials is needed, which however should not deprive learners of the opportunity to engage in first-hand discoveries as they take part in a project.

According to Kiraly (2000: 45), scaffolding is "the support offered by the teacher to assist learners in the collaborative construction of their mental models". It is not "pre-determined support" and can take a variety of forms. It is like "the placing of helpful signposts on the path as the learners create it". It does not break down a task into components so as not to prevent learners from extracting meaning from the whole learning situation. Kiraly (2000) believes that instructors should provide scaffolding by helping students identify the aspects of their expertise that are not yet sufficiently developed. In his view, the most effective scaffolding techniques are those that are linked to teamwork, reflection and conversational activities, and that take place within projects.

In relation to realistic projects, scaffolding can be used to optimize the situatedness element. In a TAPP project, in particular, it can be used as a way to bridge the knowledge gaps that are likely to emerge between groups of students, and their respective instructors, coming from different disciplinary areas.

Scaffolding for project redesign

We organized our first collaborative project within the TAPP framework in 2016. Our projects during the first three years (2016 to 2018) followed the standard TAPP 'writing for translation' format. Over one semester, University of Minnesota (UMN) students prepared a set of instructions for a North American audience, conducted a usability test on the document with the help of University of Trieste (UT) students, and then finalized the same document for translation into Italian by the UT students (Palumbo & Duin, 2018; Tham et al., 2021). In terms of learning outcomes, the focus was on student development of intercultural understanding, knowledge of translation and

technical communication, and experience with Global Virtual Teams. In 2019 we began a TAPP redesign effort to meet the student need for development of critical understanding for managing GVTs. More specifically, within each student group, one UMN student acted as the project manager, while UT students were assigned the role of either translators or revisers. The texts to be used as source materials for the translations were chosen by us – we acted as clients for each team's projects. Students were invited to follow the steps that are normally comprised in a translation project as it is carried in industry. We deployed this new format in 2019 and 2020.

The adoption of a new format for the collaborative projects introduced a higher level of complexity, and the simulation of real-life translation projects led to the need to provide students with extra supporting materials. These were essentially aimed at introducing them to the typical workflow of a translation project as it is carried out by a language service provider. We assumed that none of the students involved had prior knowledge of these operational aspects of professional translation (the UT students are normally trained on them in much later stages of their training; the UMN students are not trained on translation). Creating these materials had the benefit of providing extra background knowledge as much to us as instructors as to the students, given that each of us specializes in different disciplinary areas.

The gradual expansion of scaffolding materials and resources we used over the five-year span as projects were redesigned and made more complex is presented in Table 1. Some of these materials were created by students themselves. The pre- and post-learning reports are part of the traditional suite of resources used in TAPP projects. Personal Learning Networks are an original addition (see Palumbo & Duin 2018). Please note that the resources listed in Table 1 were all created expressly for the projects and complemented other relevant materials and documents that students were asked to read or consult. The Guide to Translation Project Management introduced in Year 4 is an abridged version of Russi & Schneider (2016), used with permission by the authors.

Table 1. Scaffolding resources in yearly iterations of the UMN-UT TAPP project

	Type of resource	For use by:
Years 1 to 3	Pre- and post-learning reports (created by students)	Students; instructors
	Project flowcharts	Students; instructors
	Introductory video on translation	UMN students and instructor
	Introductory video on instructions	UT students and instructor
	Introductory video on usability	UT students and instructor
	Personal Learning Networks (created by students)	Students; instructors
Years 4-5	Guide to Translation Project Management	UMN students and instructor
	Introductory video on translation revision	UMN students
	Project post-mortems (created by UMN students)	Instructors

Preliminary findings

The creation, organization and revision of project materials over the five-year span was the result of a continued work of joint reflection that we, as instructors, carried out through online meetings and shared written documents stored online. These documents were used to record minutes of our meetings and to exchange individual reflections on our own experience of participating in the projects. Over time, these documents turned into shared 'project journals' which can be taken as "conversational" or "interactive" data within a methodological framework inspired by "collaborative autoethnography" (Chang et al., 2013). In the AELFE-TAPP presentation, we include detailed findings based on these documents. The aim is to show how we, acting as a virtual team of *instructors*, have enacted a pattern of interactions that resonates with the one developed by Vandepitte et al (2015: 141-144; see Figure 1) to describe how *students* engaged in TAPP projects develop the interpersonal competences that are "essential for successful virtual long-term teamwork".
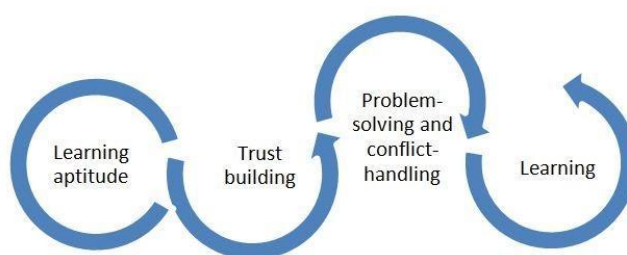

Figure 1. The "serpentine" of skills that are essential for successful teamwork (from Vandepitte et al. 2015: 142)

Conclusion

In translation training, situated learning is generally related to realistic, professional, functionalist views of translation practice. These views are normally held to be particularly relevant for the more advanced stages of translator training, typically those occurring at graduate level. We concur with Kiraly (2000: 59-60), who encourages the introduction of authentic global tasks even at initial stages of learning. This inspired our decision to redesign the basic TAPP collaborative project format and gradually introduce further elements of complexity, even for one particular group of learners (the UT students) who are still at undergraduate level. The redesign has benefited all participating students in the sense of providing them with better opportunities of preparing for future professional activity. It has also benefited us as instructors, by widening the scope of our collaboration and providing us with new ideas for both teaching and research.

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