

Redesigning TAPP for Developing Critical Understanding for Managing Global Virtual Teams

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Abstract

Translators and technical communicators increasingly perform their work as part of global virtual teams (GVTs). To prepare students for developing critical understanding for such work, instructors can assign readings, asking students to reflect on the importance of building trust (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013), cultural intelligence (Li, Rau, Li, & Maedche, 2017), and strategies for managing multicultural teams (Behfar, Kern, & Brett, 2006). More important for developing critical understanding, however, is the experience of managing a “real” Global Virtual Team (GVT).

Research questions for this work include the following: How does attention to and work with international translators influence critical understanding for managing GVTs? and How does situatedness influence critical understanding of the many requirements and factors in a translation project? This article provides a brief theoretical background to the project and then details our redesign of the standard collaborative formats of the Trans-Atlantic & Pacific Project (TAPP) and associated assignments to focus on student development of critical understanding for managing GVTs. We include identification of themes from a subset of literature relevant to student practice in managing a translation team; description of the TAPP redesign in which University of Minnesota (UMN) students serve as project managers of teams of University of Trieste (UT) students practicing translation; and a brief summary of results from deployments of this model during 2019 and 2020. We conclude with emphasis on the need to redesign the TAPP format to meet evolving learning needs of students.

Keywords: *Global Virtual Teams, project management, translation, technical communication, pedagogic design*

Introduction

Technical communication program curricula and associated student learning outcomes at the University of Minnesota (UMN) in the U.S. are informed by ongoing interaction with industry leaders. An intergenerational group of business leaders, the Technical Communication Advisory Board, engage directly with students and work with faculty and staff to enrich the curriculum. These leaders emphasize the need for student



development of global and intercultural understanding, experience as part of GVTs, and practice in project management. Academic and industry literature supports this need for increased intercultural understanding (Swartz, Barbosa, & Crawford, 2020), experience in GVTs (2020 Trends in Global Virtual Work; Cleary et al., 2015), and project management (Lauren & Schreiber, 2018).

As part of the Trans-Atlantic and Pacific Project (TAPP), the two of us have collaborated over the past five years to meet these learning outcomes. Projects during the first three years primarily focused on student development of intercultural understanding, knowledge in translation and technical communication, and experience with GVTs. Over one semester, UMN students prepared a set of instructions for a North American audience, conducted a usability test on the document with the help of UT students, and then finalized the same document for translation into Italian by the UT students (Palumbo & Duin, 2018; Tham et al., 2021). Based on this work, we developed workshop resources for others to design standard TAPP projects (see z.umn.edu/TAPP).

In 2019 we began a TAPP redesign effort to meet the student need for development of critical understanding for managing GVTs. We deployed this new format in 2019 and 2020. This article includes themes from literature that informed our efforts and detail on the redesign itself in which UMN students serve as project managers of teams of UT students practicing translation.

Redesign

For this redesign effort, we located and reviewed literature to improve our understanding and to locate readings of relevance for students charged with managing a global virtual translation team. We reviewed articles over the past 15 years from literature across technical, business, professional, and international communication; management and business; and translation disciplines. As most U.S. technical communication students have little knowledge of translation and project management, we also worked to locate guides for project management of translation projects and to develop project overviews and videos on translation workflow.

Our review of literature identified overlap in many of the competencies for technical communication and translation students, with Minacori and Veisblat's (2010) seminal work providing a guidepost for critical understanding across these disciplines. Cleary et al. (2015) note this overlap across "intercultural awareness and knowledge, an understanding of contexts (cultural, professional, and collaborative), and the ability to bring both logical and creative approaches to the activity of text production" as well as the importance of "social skills and the ability to build and maintain relationships" as being "vital to the success of both technical communicators and translators" (p.1).

Themes identified in our literature review include time for discussion of leadership and management philosophies; focus on relationship, team building and trust; structured



communication patterns, practices, and technology use; intercultural and rhetorical awareness; and distributed workflows, negotiation, and conflict management. As part of this review effort, we also located *A Guide to Translation Project Management* by Russi and Schneider (2016). Receiving permission, we created an abridged version of this guide for student use. It includes sections on understanding the translation process, planning a translation project, providing support to the translation process, and templates for supporting documents (e.g., tracking sheets, guidelines, and checklists).

Cognizant of the above key themes, we redesigned the TAPP assignment to focus on student development of critical understanding for managing GVTs. Here we provide the purpose of the assignment for UMN and UT students, project workflow (Table 1) and associated readings and resources. A manuscript under development includes detailed results from 2019 and 2020.

The purpose of the redesigned assignment reads as follows:

- For UT students: The project is meant to organize a simulation of professional translation work as it is carried out in industry. More specifically, students will be organized as teams and given specific roles and tasks. Each individual team will complete a translation job following the stages and steps that a real-life professional translation project goes through.
- For UMN students: The purpose of this specific project is to provide you with practice in managing a project for translation of materials for international / multicultural audiences. This includes an understanding of the problems that translators encounter and collaboration with peers from a different culture.

<p>Pre-project work</p> <p>U.S. students review project management and translation readings and resources, construct personal learning network (PLN) visualizations for use in introducing themselves to the UT students, and develop and review team building plans.</p>	<p>Class discussion of leadership and management philosophies, intercultural and rhetorical awareness.</p> <p>See Palumbo and Duin (2018) for detail on student development of PLN visualizations and the impact on development of cross-cultural understanding.</p>
<p>Project start</p> <p>UMN and UT students in which students exchange introductions</p>	<p>Focus on relationship, team building and trust.</p>



<p>and project managers (PMs) begin team building efforts.</p> <p>PMs receive source texts for translation and the translation brief from instructors (who serve as clients for the project) and create a project plan for translation team members.</p>	<p>Kohl, J.R. (2008). <u>The global English style guide: Writing clear, translatable documentation for a global market.</u></p> <p>Minacori, P. & Veisblat, L. (2010). <u>Translation and technical communication: Chicken or egg?</u> <i>Erudit</i>, 55(4), 752-768.</p> <p>Perez, C.R. (2002). <u>Translation and project management.</u> <i>Translation Journal</i>, 6(4).</p>
<p>Preparation</p> <p>UMN students further organize the project and document team building efforts, assign roles to translation team members, and begin using a translation project tracking sheet (template).</p> <p>PMs decide on which supporting documents from the abridged guide to distribute to team members.</p>	<p>Focus on structured communication patterns, practices, and technology use.</p> <p>Davison, R.M., Panteli, N., Hardin, A.M., & Fuller, M.A. (2017). <u>Establishing effective global virtual student teams.</u> <i>IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication</i>, 60(3), 317-329.</p> <p>Olohan, M., & Davitti, E. (2017). <u>Dynamics of trusting in translation project management: Leaps of faith and balancing acts.</u> <i>Journal of Contemporary Ethnography</i>, 46(4), 391-416.</p> <p>Risku, H., Pein-Weber, C., & Milosevic, J. (2016). <u>The task of the translator: Comparing the views of the client and the translator.</u> <i>International Journal of Communication</i>, 10, 989-1008.</p>
<p>Translation</p> <p>UT students work according to the instructions, guidelines and checklists provided by PMs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Translation proper (carried out by one or two translation students depending on team size) 2. Revision (carried out by one or two students depending on team size) 3. Review of target texts (carried out by PM) <p>PMs update the client (instructors) on the progress of their translation</p>	<p>Focus on the translation process and use of tracking sheets, guidelines, and checklists.</p> <p>Behfar, Kern, & Bret (see references)</p> <p>Crisp & Jarvenpaa (see references)</p>

and describe technical issues or industry lingo to the client.	
<p>Submission</p> <p>PMs make sure the texts have been translated and checked, and that they are in the required format.</p> <p>PMs then submit the translated materials to the client (instructors).</p>	<p>PMs include a cover memo on how the PM managed this project amid disruptions (e.g., COVID during 2020) and questions raised by team members and how the PM addressed these and guided the team.</p>
<p>Project post-mortem</p> <p>Students exchange reflections on the overall project.</p> <p>PMs submit a project post-mortem to the client (instructors).</p>	<p>PMs conclude the project by leading the team to collaborate in completing a post-mortem on this project. PMs include a summary of they organized the team's work (e.g., use of technology, regular meetings, determining roles and tasks, managing challenges, etc.) along with detail regarding what went well, what was difficult, and recommendations for future work of this type.</p>

Table 1. TAPP redesign project workflow and associated readings and resources.

Preliminary results

A corpus analysis of the post-mortem reports indicated UT and UMN students' satisfaction with the overall project, with top adjectives describing it as follows: "good, great, interesting, useful, excellent, and positive." Top adjectives indicating critical understanding included "different, future, difficult, important, challenging, and professional." In the AELFE-TAPP presentation, we include detailed findings from the 2019 and 2020 projects; these include analysis of online discussions and post-mortem reports that illustrate increased functional and critical understanding of translator, manager, and client roles along with evidence on how students addressed ambiguity, taking leaps of faith as part of building critical understanding and developing dynamics of trust throughout the project (Olohan & Davitti, 2017). Study of GVT technology use indicates that project managers primarily used Skype for weekly meetings, shared Google Drive folders and files for organizing work, and used WhatsApp for secure messaging.

Conclusions

This redesign of TAPP serves as an important "crosswalk" for the technical communication and translation disciplines, making visible the connections between



corresponding competencies. This redesign confirms continued adaptability of the TAPP framework in meeting critical learning outcomes, in this case, for concrete practice in managing GVTs. Themes from project management literature proved effective throughout the redesign effort.

Despite development of the abridged guide and a shared Google Q&A document for students, we forewarned PMs that there would undoubtedly be ambiguity throughout the project. In a post-mortem, one PM wrote:

I am glad we were forewarned about the intentional ambiguity of the project—and I appreciate the challenge of that ambiguity. A fair amount of guidance from our professors/clients was received and appreciated.

As a side note and coincidence, I was told today by my manager that I will be starting a new position (a promotion) very soon, in which my first project will hold a good amount of “ambiguity!”

And a UT student wrote:

I found this project really engaging and gratifying. Our supervisor planned everything so well we were able to complete all the stages ahead of schedule, and I appreciated the possibility of sharing opinions and ideas with all my team members. For the first time I was able to take part in an official translation project and my role as a translator enabled me to put into practice what we are learning in class.

Duin, Tham, and Pedersen (2021) emphasize that 21st century pedagogical collaboration be designed to include relevant experiences for students to practice co-authoring and collaboration, with exposure to the workplace contexts as they approach their work. Redesign of the TAPP format to meet the evolving learning needs of students is imperative for both translation and technical communication.

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