

TRAINING TECHNICAL COMMUNICATION STUDENTS TO WORK WITH TRANSLATORS

By Yvonne Cleary, Senior Member and Darina M. Slattery

Introduction to Technical Communication and Translation

Much of the content produced by technical communicators and content developers will later be translated for users from other cultures. For example, instruction manuals, web sites, e-learning courses, software tools and their components (e.g. messages, menus, and dialog boxes) frequently need to be available in many languages and for many locales. However, good translation is only possible when the source text (the text to be translated) is written clearly and with translation in mind.

In this context, technical communicators have an important role to play as facilitators of translation. Their attention to linguistic features and stylistic conventions can help or hinder translators in fully understanding and effectively translating a text. Likewise, when technical communicators clearly understand internationalization and localization issues, they can address the requirements of selecting audio, visuals, and other multimedia elements that are suitable for audiences in other locales. As such, they can make decisions that can help or hinder the translation and localization processes. For these reasons, it is important to teach technical communication students about various aspects of translation – and provide them with opportunities to apply such ideas – during their educational careers.

Educational Approaches

Because good technical communication facilitates good translation, it is important to train technical communication students to work with translators. To this end, the MA in Technical Communication and E-Learning at the University of Limerick includes content on writing and designing for translation and localization throughout the curriculum. Students learn about writing characteristics that can cause problems for translators. Students also learn about the

effects of culture on users' perceptions of design and about how formatting and technical conventions can differ from nation to nation and culture to culture.

By examining such issues through different courses, students gain an effective theoretical understanding of the potential difficulties of writing and designing for translation and localization. Yet to help students fully understand how such factors work, it is essential to provide them with opportunities to apply what they have learned. Doing so often requires access to counterparts in other cultures – individuals who can serve in the role of the translators and localizers students will work with upon completing their studies.

One way to achieve this experience is through international projects where students use online media to engage in different translation and localization activities. At the University of Limerick, such experiences take place through a virtual team documentation translation project involving international partners. In particular, students in Ireland collaborate with partners (students) in the United States and France to work on true international content creation and translation projects. Through this collaborative approach, students in multiple nations gain first-hand experience of how to work with colleagues in international contexts.

The Virtual Team Documentation Translation Project

The project undertaken by University of Limerick students involves an annual collaboration between faculty and students at three universities: the University of Limerick (UL) in Ireland, the University of Central Florida (UCF) in the US, and the Université Paris-Diderot (France). For this project, the process begins with Irish and American students collaboratively writing documentation in English. The resulting text is then delivered to participating French students who are responsible for translating those original English-language texts into French.

Planning for this virtual team project first began in 2005, when faculty from UL and UCF met at the 2005 ProComm conference (then called the International Professional Communication Conference) held at UL. Through a series of discussions, the faculty explored the possibilities of joint projects for their students to undertake. To foster collaboration around such projects, UL and UCF faculty ran several virtual team projects between 2006 and 2012, and these undertakings involved Irish and American students using online media to collaborate on different undertakings.

In 2012, a French faculty member became involved with these projects, and the nature of the international collaboration expanded to include a translation component.

Today, this international project involves grouping Irish, American, and French students to teams of 6 to 7 individuals who use online media to collaboratively write and translate documents such as instructions for setting up an account for, or using a feature of, an online collaborative tool. Each team consists of writers (the Irish and the American students) and translators (the French students). The members of these teams are responsible for working together to produce both a well-written English-language source document and an equivalent French translation. The quality of the original source texts and the resulting translations is assessed by the instructors in the US, Ireland, and France.

How the Virtual Team Projects are Coordinated

The virtual team project is overseen by four instructors; two in Ireland, one in France, and one in the US. The instructors plan every aspect of the project, from placing students in teams, to offering guidance and instruction on virtual teamwork, to grading the final submissions. For students, this project involves multiple phases.

In the first phase, the writers (the Irish and American students) have to communicate with their French teammates to select a topic for which they must both write and translate related instructions. Typically, the topic involves a particular technology or technology-enabled process (e.g. how to create a Google document for collaboration or how to videoconference using Skype). Every student on the team is required to engage in the discussions about prospective topics and to then select a final topic for the overall project.

As they prepare the English-language version of the instructions, the Irish and American students writing the source document must ensure that the English text adheres to Plain English guidelines and is suitable for translation. (See the Plain English Campaign for information on writing for plain English: <http://www.plainenglish.co.uk/>.) Next, the writers have to choose suitable graphics to accompany their written instructions. In so doing, they need to take localization issues into account, and this step involves seeking the advice of their French teammates on how to select effective visuals. Once completed, the final version of

the English-language document is then sent to the French team members for translation and localization.

During the translation/localization stage of the project, the students working as translators have to regularly query their Irish and American teammates to seek clarification on certain terms and phrases used in the source text. They also seek clarification on the meaning of different parts of the source text in order to ensure the translator effectively understands the materials he or she is translating.

Through such collaborations and interactions, students learn about effective international communication and project management while also learning about translation. As such, this virtual team project exposes students to the challenges associated with selecting suitable tools for creating materials. It also provides them with experiences associated with writing translatable and localizable documentation, managing geographically diverse team members, and communicating with culturally diverse teammates.

Preparing Students for Careers in Technical Communication

The experience of working with French translators provides the Irish and American writers with practical experience of how their writing decisions affect comprehension and, ultimately, a translator's ability to accurately convey a writer's intentions and objectives. Moreover, involvement in this virtual team project helps prepare students to work in industry, as most of today's technical communication jobs require some form of virtual collaboration – if not some aspect of working with translation and localization. Through participation in such projects, students learn about the challenges and rewards of collaborating with people from other nations across time zones, using technologies to facilitate the process. In so doing, they develop the skills sets employers see as valuable when working in the modern global business context.

The advantages of such projects are not lost on students preparing for the job market. As one student (a participant in the project in Spring 2014) noted in a blog post about the project:

It has made me realise that a virtual team is very effective as [it] gives availability (sic) to ideas and minds outside of your own geographical area. However, if an

individual did not partake fully then the team could easily suffer. Thankfully, we did not see any negative sides on our virtual project and we had a very successful outcome and experience.

Feedback from graduates further illustrates that such experiences are central to helping them to secure employment because they are able to discuss their experiences in job interviews. Many students also report they now have a better idea of what to expect from virtual teams when they begin working – a factor that can give them an edge during and after the job search.

Prospective Connections for Industry and Educators

A recent paper by the authors (see Cleary, Flammia, Minacori, & Slattery, 2015) outlines a process technical communicators in education can use to partner with educators on similar kinds of projects. To foster such collaborations, we (the authors) recommend interested individuals first conduct research on overseas universities and programs that include components on which their employees (if in industry) or technical communication students (if in education) might collaborate (e.g., a writing or translation component). Once a suitable program is identified, the faculty member can contact a counterpart at the other institution and ask to discuss potential ideas about collaboration. In such conversations, participants may need to consider and discuss questions such as:

- Do both universities have enough overlap in their semesters for students to be able to work together on a project?
- Which semester should the project run in?
- In which course could a virtual team project be included?
- What learning outcomes should the project achieve? If possible, it is helpful to share course outlines, or even to invite faculty members to view one another's courses through virtual learning environments (VLEs).

We recommend interested individuals start to collaborate with potential partners in other universities at least a year before running a virtual team project involving trainees, employees, or students. That time period provides all involved parties a chance to better understand the scope of such projects and to agree on the project they will require participants (employees or students) to undertake. Once these factors are confirmed,

participants can work out the more specific details (e.g., dates and deliverables) of the project.

This extended time for interaction also enables faculty to get to know one another better, and to engage in socioemotional communication essential to building trust. Such trust is often essential to effective outcomes for the participants (both the faculty and the learners) involved in such virtual team projects (see Flammia, Cleary, & Slattery, 2010). If possible, the faculty coordinating such projects should try to meet face-to-face (e.g., at a conference) to discuss the project in more detail and to get to know one another better. If meeting face-to-face is not possible, a videoconference (e.g., via a tool like Skype) can be a good alternative to getting to know one's collaborators better.

In terms of fostering industry-academy partnerships around such topics, the authors invite technical communicators and content developers in industry to the UL campus each year. The purpose of these visits is for these individuals to share their experiences involving content creation, translation, and localization with students. In so doing, these visitors also provide insights on virtual teamwork.

In cases, local industry has served as a client – or as a source of the various projects undertaken by students for these international activities. Occasionally, our virtual team assignments have, for example, involved client-based projects (see Slattery, Cleary & Flammia, 2008). To this end, we welcome suggestions from technical communication practitioners about service learning projects that the student writers and translators could work on in such educational contexts. Additionally, the authors regularly invite practitioners to contribute to – and encourage readers of this entry to participate in – such projects by providing sample content for technical communication and translation students to work on in such projects.

Conclusions

Technical communication students need to develop many skills, including skills in writing for international audiences and writing for translation and localization. Students also need to learn how to collaborate on projects with geographically dispersed team members. This

situation motivated faculty members at the University of Limerick, University of Central Florida, and Université Paris-Diderot to collaborate on annual documentation and translation projects between Irish, American, and French students.

These projects emphasize the importance of writing in Plain English, writing culturally sensitive documentation, and selecting appropriate graphics. They also introduce students to common challenges associated with working in virtual teams and include aspects relating to technology use, culture, communication, and management. By expanding such collaborative projects to include a wider range of industry and academic participants, individuals in different segments of the field can work together to better prepare students for today's globalized workplace.

Suggested Reading

Cleary, Yvonne, Madelyn Flammia, Patricia Minacori, and Darina M. Slattery. Global virtual teams create and translate technical documentation: Communication strategies, challenges and recommendations. In *Professional Communication Conference (ProComm), 2015 IEEE International*, pp. 1-10. IEEE, 2015.

Flammia, Madelyn, Yvonne Cleary, and Darina M. Slattery. Leadership roles, socioemotional communication strategies, and technology use of Irish and US students in virtual teams, *Professional Communication, IEEE Transactions on*, 53 (2010): 89-101.

Flammia, Madelyn, Yvonne Cleary and Darina M. Slattery. *Virtual Teams in Higher Education: A Handbook for Students and Teachers*. Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing (forthcoming).

Slattery, Darina, Yvonne Cleary, and Madelyn Flammia. Preparing technical communication students for their role in the information economy: Client-based virtual team collaboration between Irish and US students. In *Professional Communication Conference, 2008. IPCC 2008. IEEE International*, pp. 1-10. IEEE, 2008.

Contributors

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