

VIRTUAL INTERNATIONAL SERVICE LEARNING Negotiating boundaries

Molly K. Johnson

Eastern Washington University

Keywords. Virtual service learning, Global partnership, Collaboration, International communication, Literature review.

In a special issue on international service learning and globally networked environments, Starke-Meyerring (2010) argues students must learn to “collaborate across multiple boundaries” to become “citizens and professionals in the globalization of their fields, work, and civic life” (p. 260). Case studies and exercises engage students in global communication, but service learning directly connects students with global partners to collaboratively solve open-ended problems.

Although on-site contact provides effective service-learning experiences, a review of literature about *virtual* service learning and global partnerships documents the value of virtual collaboration, acknowledges the complexities of tasks, time, translation, and technology—the “pragmatic details” (Craig, Poe, & Rojas, 2010, p. 284)—and



CONNEXIONS • INTERNATIONAL PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION JOURNAL

2013, 1(1), 167–171

ISSN 2325-6044

suggests strategies for negotiating boundaries among its US and Canadian (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006), Mexican (Craig *et al.*, 2010), Irish (Flammia, 2011), Russian (Stevens, 2001; Herrington, 2010), Cuban (Sapp, 2004), European (Mousten, Maylath, Vandepitte, & Humbley, 2010), and open source (Ding 2007) community partners.

Virtual collaborations include an array of tasks and deliverables, each negotiated and adapted to its international context: correspondence, résumés, proposals, oral presentations, process or product documentation, white papers, websites, publicity materials, and usability testing. For example, in an open documentation project, students research, write, test the usability of the documentation, and create international marketing materials for open source software. Ding (2007) observes the “Open Source community [becomes] not only the client . . . but the provider of information and feedback” (p. 3).

Coordinating with community partners across time and cultures adds layers of complexity. Authors report finding a “window of opportunity” for online collaboration requires students manage multiple time zones and conflicting holiday schedules (Mousten *et al.*, 2010). To ensure successful collaboration, Herrington (2010) recommends daily communication, regardless of time zones. She notes that adopting a strict communication schedule reduces team and production problems for US and Russian partners, thus documenting that international communication cannot be taught but only learned in context, through experience, after students “struggle with it in application” (p. 522).

Authors also report translation issues, especially for monolingual US teams; however, Starke-Meyerring (2010) observes that trans-

lation challenges teams to examine their assumptions about traditional linguistic norms. Some authors include modern language or TESL programs as project partners (Craig *et al.*, 2010) or ensure that teams include members who can translate materials (Starke-Meyerring & Andrews, 2006). Mousten *et al.* (2010) discuss “text travel”—texts moving from the original language to translated text (p. 403)—and argue that instructors must prepare students to address translation issues, for example, loan words, negation, hedges, registers, and formal/informal discourse.

Virtual partnerships rely on technology to facilitate collaboration and document production, but authors also acknowledge the challenges. For Starke-Meyerring and Andrews (2006), technology facilitates “water-cooler conversations” and repairs “faultlines” within teams (p. 36). They observe that, when a team’s name signals a “shared team culture,” their name predicts the team’s eventual success (p. 36). Global partners use email, wikis, collaboration software, Google Docs, and video conferencing for research and production; some use Skype, blogs, forums, texting, and one uses creative commons to publish open source documentation. Not all team projects, however, have easy access to technology. Sapp (2004) reports scarce print resources, outdated software/hardware, limited Internet and computer access, and geopolitical constraints create significant challenges in collaborations with Cuban partners.

Virtual service learning challenges our perceptions about tasks, time, translation, and technology; nonetheless, social change, the expansion of communication technologies, and a global economy make

virtual international partnerships inevitable. Current trends suggest virtual partnerships will rapidly increase the demand on students and professionals to use social media to network and collaboratively create, share, and manage content. Focusing on “positive societal change” (Flammia, 2011, p. 3) through virtual service-learning partnerships will develop students’ abilities to solve problems, negotiate constraints, and productively engage in global partnerships. ■

References

- Craig, J., Poe, M., & Rojas, M-F. G. (2010). Professional communication education in a global context: A collaboration between the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Mexico, and Universidad de Quintana Roo, Mexico. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 24, 267–295. doi:10.1177/1050651910363269
- Ding, H (2007). Open source: Platform for virtual service learning and user-initiated research. *Professional Communication Conference, 2007. IPCC 2007. IEEE International*, 1–5. doi:10.1109/IPCC.2007.4464080
- Flammia, M. (2011). Using service learning and global virtual team projects to integrate sustainability in the technical communication curriculum. *Professional Communication Conference (IPCC), 2011 IEEE International*, 1–9. doi:10.1109/IPCC.2011.6087192
- Herrington, T. K. (2010). Crossing global boundaries: Beyond intercultural communication. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 24, 516–539. doi:10.1177/1050651910371303
- Mousten, B., Maylath, B., Vandepitte, S., & Humbley, J. (2010). Learning localization through Trans-Atlantic collaboration: Bridging the gap. *IEEE Transactions on Professional Communication*, 53, 401–411. doi:10.1109/TPC.2010.2077481

Starke-Meyerring, D. (2010). Globally networked learning environments in professional communication: Challenging normalized ways of learning, teaching, and knowing. *Journal of Business and Technical Communication*, 24, 259–266. doi:10.1177/1050651910363266

Starke-Meyerring, D., & Andrews, D. (2006). Building a shared virtual learning culture: An international classroom partnership. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 69, 25–49. doi:10.1177/1080569905285543

Sapp, D. A. (2004). Global partnerships in business communication: An institutional collaboration between the United States and Cuba. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 67, 267–280. doi:10.1177/1080569904268051

Stevens, B. (2001). Cross-cultural service learning: American and Russian students learn applied organizational communication. *Business Communication Quarterly*, 64, 59–69. doi:10.1177/108056990106400305

About the Author

Molly K. Johnson, PhD, has over 15 years of experience in rhetoric and professional communication and teaches a range of courses, including grant writing, editing, and information design. Her research includes service learning and institutional discourse.

Email. mjohnson@ewu.edu

Contact.

Department of English
Eastern Washington University
Cheney, WA 99004
USA