https://doi.org/10.53656/for21.36writ

ONLINE COLLABORATIVE WRITING: A TOOL FOR ENHANCING STUDENTS' BUSINESS SKILLS AND CROSS-CULTURAL AWARENESS

Aneta Stefanova
University of Economics – Varna (Bulgaria)

Abstract. This paper describes a project implemented by students from the University of Economics in Varna and the University of Costa Rica as part of their respective English Language instruction. In the course of the project six teams comprising students from both universities collaborated to create blogs on topics of their choice. The paper dwells on aims of the project, the process that resulted in the creation of six blogs, the skills that students developed or furthered as a result of this activity and the project outcomes.

Keywords: students' projects; collaborative online writing; blogging; cultural awareness; business skills

Whenever I ask my students what skills they possess, an embarrassed silence follows. If I ask what knowledge they have acquired, they tend to be more aware of their achievements, but any skills identification seems to be beyond their reach. At this point they even forget that they can read and write. Of course, we can blame secondary education for this deficit in skills and deficit in awareness of skills but the point is that a conscious acquisition of skills that are based on the knowledge acquired by students and that are transferrable across different areas can serve many useful purposes: it can make students more confident on the labour market and it can make employers happier with the accomplishments of their new recruits.

In a recently published Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) entitled 'Future of work — acquiring of appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of future jobs' the following priorities in skills acquisition have been outlined:

"The EESC supports an approach giving strong emphasis on soft skills– such as complex problem solving, critical thinking, teamwork, sense-making, novel and adapting thinking, cross-cultural competency, virtual collaboration, cognitive flexibility, etc., as they are key elements of human development and can help workers to think in an autonomous way, before they are asked to become digitally competent.

The EESC suggests paying particular attention to the development of these skills in the revision of the European framework for key competences."[1)]

Project goals

– To create blogs on a chosen topic using collaborative efforts.

– To further develop critical thinking skills in terms of how students perceive culture and nationality.

– To further develop creative thinking and problem-solving skills in carrying out the different tasks, leading to fulfilling the main goal of the project.

– To develop enhanced cross-cultural communication skills by working with foreign students who speak English as their second language.

– To develop teamwork skills in the course of completing the team projects.

– To further develop intercultural knowledge and competence.

Project background

In the last three years different groups of students studying for a degree in International Economic Relations at the University of Economics in Varna, Bulgaria and their peers from the University of Costa Rica have been involved in three different projects designed to raise their cross-cultural awareness and help develop different soft skills. The project completed in the winter semester of the 2018/2019 academic year was entitled 'Online Collaborative Blog Writing' and was intended to bring students from the two continents together to create a blog on a topic that appeals to and inspires their generation.

About 60 students from the two universities were divided into 8 teams whose members were asked to meet up and communicate on an especially created Facebook page so that they achieve the goal of the project: creating a blog online.

After mild opposition to the unusual task they were assigned within the framework of their English Language module, students from the two universities started getting round to it.

Project phases

The first task that each of the 8 teams had to accomplish was to meet up in the Facebook group called Intercultural Collaborative Online Writing. Meetings on Facebook were difficult and sometimes frustrating due to the 9-hour time difference. Students from both universities would complain that their counterparts did not show up for the appointment or were late and therefore woke them up in the middle of the night, etc. Labels such as 'lazy', 'inconsiderate', even 'rude' resulted from students' first attempts at intercultural interaction.

Relationship-building and good communication are paramount in order for a team to attain its goals and in our case the limited duration of the project (six weeks, framing the beginning of the semester in Varna and the end of the semester in San

Jose) required that mutual understanding and cohesion within the teams be achieved in a matter of days. It is important for a group or team to create a strong culture that supports collaboration, which was at the heart of our project. After the first failed attempts to establish contact and impose common rules and approaches to the team work some of the Bulgarian students were discouraged and asked for permission to carry out the project on their own, i.e. without the involvement of their Costa Rican counterparts. Luckily, most teams were eventually able to overcome this initial miscommunication and things started shaping up, some small talk took place, ice-breakers were used, e.g.:

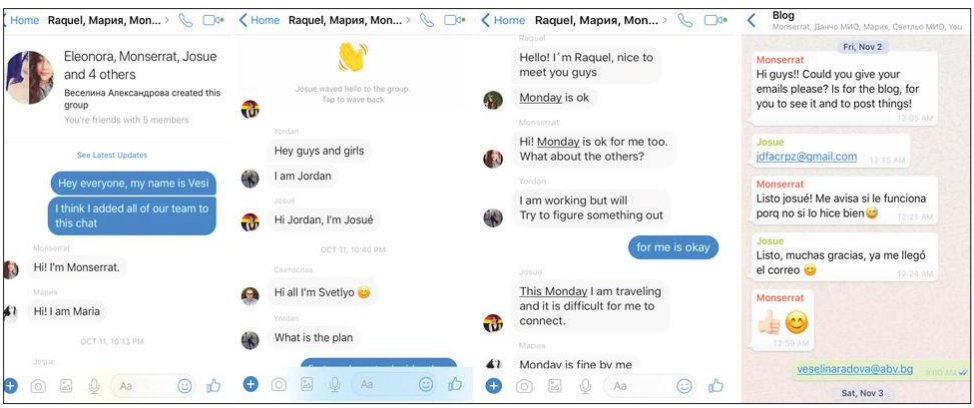

Figure 1

Following the introductions in the first week of the project, the teams had to get together using any electronic media and decide on the topic of their blog. This was an important stage in the project since it required achieving some common ground early on and even compromising since the students were randomly chosen to form a team and they did not necessarily have common interests. Two of the teams decided to start cooking blogs, featuring Bulgarian and Costa Rican traditional dishes. The other blog topics were: Culture and Traditions of Costa Rica and Bulgaria; Art and Culture; Values; History and Traditional Clothing of Bulgaria and Costa Rica. Two teams did not produce blogs.

During week three students had to research blog platforms and choose one for their blogs. In class we discussed some popular blogs and techniques for attracting an audience to your blog. The possibility of a lucrative blog appealed to students and helped them realize why blogging is regarded a useful business skill. While a few of the Bulgarian students had previous blogging experience, most of the participants in the project, although familiar with the increasingly popular activity, had never considered writing a blog themselves before. Since teamwork is about

sharing the workload among people with different competences and skills, not everybody involved in the project learned all the technicalities of blogging or became expert blogger but they nevertheless were part of the whole process and shared the end result.

The last three weeks of the project were dedicated to actually writing the blog posts. In most teams all students contributed with at least one post or helped with the visual layout of the blog. Again, since this was a team task, some of the team members were more involved in the technical side of the assignment, while others were more willing to help with the creative writing process.

The six blogs produced as a result of the online international collaboration are, as follows:

Team 2 Cultural traditions of BG and CR

https://monserrat15200985.blogspot.com/2018/11/have-you-ever-heard-about-bulgarian.html?fbclid=IwAR1wASU4kAPBEHCKRIs0Lyrg0MEBML2z_w9Ger4sdiUpjezg7omOGeAQh3s

Team 3 Art and Culture

https://costaricaandbulgaria.blogspot.com/?fbclid=IwAR3lxZb-ULmZj_lackIEy8bhMXg6F6c20Na3lU-4a8eXd2nKu5aDE21LiKE

Team 4 Traditional Dishes in Costa Rica and Bulgaria https://cuisinebgcr.wordpress.com/?fbclid=IwAR0E9J8o7ovpYW_ea40ZzgYrQQmkTBg0u6RveT3l8Xl_4NfBHo4if-kZUHc

Team 5 The Taste of the Cultures https://bulrica.wordpress.com/

Team 7 Values https://value693840806.wordpress.com/

Team 8 Traditional Clothing https://bcr-interculturalcompetence.weebly.com/?fbclid=IwAR38JFXTf3ONBK35yCwAM56NY6AfysDcyzDceE4xuC1na3d2qQjH4M2Ey4I

Expectations mismatches

In cross-cultural interaction it is often expectations that cause disappointment and result in misunderstanding. Although students were made familiar with theoretical models of cultural differences, solved different case studies involving cross-cultural misunderstanding and role-played situations of intercultural exchanges, they nevertheless entered the project wearing their expectations of how it had to be implemented. Very often these expectations brought about misunderstanding or even cultural incidents within the teams.

Choosing the topic to write about in the blog proved to be the stone of contention for some of the teams. Students were given a list of indicative topics they could choose from. The list was intended to help students decide on a theme they were willing to write about, however in some of the teams this list created some friction. In team 8, the Bulgarians suggested they wrote about the two countries' history and traditional clothing. However, this topic was not 'on the list' and the Costa Ricans

refused to consider it for that purpose. They didn't even thought of asking their teacher if a topic that was not on the list could be chosen. Students from the two cultures proved to have a different approach to authority. While the Bulgarians felt they could be more flexible in the choice of topic, the Costa Ricans thought they should stick strictly to the list they were given to choose from. A similar argument arose when students had to choose the media for online interaction. Again the Costa Ricans tried to comply strictly with their teacher's requirement to communicate through Skype. Since Skype is not widely used by young people in Bulgaria, the Bulgarian students chose other media, e.g. Messenger, WatsApp, etc. which met with the opposition of their Central American counterparts. If we resort to the Hofstede model of cultural differences to explain these 'critical incidents', we would find ourselves at a loss, since in the relevant dimension of Power Distance Bulgaria scores 70, while Costa Rica scores 35, which means that Bulgarians should be expected to respect authority more and to uphold the established hierarchies. A possible explanation is that the Bulgarian students were in their 3rd year and therefore felt more confident executing a task using their own discretion, while the Costa Rican freshmen relied more on direction from their instructors.

Lessons learnt/skills acquired

Nowadays remote work allows companies to compete in an increasingly globalized society. Adapting to this new workplace is a challenge with many dimensions, one of them being dealing with corporate, national and personal cultural differences. However, sometimes perceived differences are not actually differences but our prejudices and quick judgments of others. In the course of the six-week project students were able to revise their initial impressions, to change conclusions that they had quickly jumped at and to understand the **human element** involved in distance collaboration. After the initial disappointment caused by the lack of smooth or timely communication, students started sharing personal information, showing pictures and videos of their homes, the views from their windows and thus they were able to make a connection that bode well for the project work. During her project presentation one of the Bulgarian students reported that initially she was quite angry with her Costa Rican counterparts who did not seem to take any effort in moving the project forward. Later on, she learned some personal information about one of her team mates that helped her understand the lack of active involvement on her part and resulted in human empathy and even bitterness over the unfair judgment that was hastily passed on her. Coming from collectivist cultures (Bulgaria scores 30 and Costa Rica scores 15 on Hofstede's Individualism dimension)[2)] students grew closer and formed bonds that in some cases resulted in friendships they intend to keep and work on outside the project. This is part of the chat in Team 4 that the Bulgarian team members shared in class during their project presentation:



Figure 2

Getting to know people at a distance and establishing close relationships is important when the aim is to achieve cohesion and a common understanding within the team. This is a starting point for mutually beneficial collaboration that is conductive to achieving the team's goals. At one point during the project there was a traditional festival in Costa Rica and the Bulgarian students were made part of it with the videos and pictures that their team mates were sending. Finding out about each other and sharing personal moments with their distant partners made the teams much more united and prepared to dedicate themselves to the achievement of the common goals.

Time keeping is of utmost importance in some cultures and a matter of certain flexibility in others. In any case, working at a distance requires more discipline on the part of team members and more sensitivity as to when it is appropriate and socially acceptable to contact colleagues and co-workers. Finding the right time to contact one another was one of the challenges students were faced with. However, dealing with this hurdle and making (sometimes missed) appointments to move the project forward made students contemplate how time zones complicate international communication and helped them develop strategies of communicating. After some initial adjustments in the course of the project work, students from the six teams that produced results learned how to find the right intersection of their schedules so that they could communicate and solve problems related to their joint task.

Negotiating and striving to achieve common ground is important when working at a distance, because people often do not have the whole picture and sometimes have very limited personal contact or insight into the culture they are dealing with. Compromise was necessary so that the project could move on. Students learned to act like a team in a matter of weeks and to put the team's priorities before their own preferences and leadership ambitions.

Blogging is a useful business skill that nowadays companies make use of to create a flexible and effective communication strategy. All students involved in the

project learned about the different blogging platforms and the basic steps of writing a blog. Mentioning this newly acquired skills would certainly make their CVs look more respectable.

Students' online collaboration requires intensive **collaboration of the instructors** who have to design the course and implement it step by step, coordinating and adjusting methods and requirements on the go. This collaboration has proven to be a very useful tool for enhancing teachers' cultural awareness and understanding of the learning potential of distance cross-cultural exchanges. The involved instructors continued the collaborative writing momentum and co-authored two papers on the projects that were presented at different conferences.[3)]

Students' testimonials

Upon completion of the project the Bulgarian students had to present their blogs, as well as the process that had lead to their creation. When asked to sum up the benefits of the project, they mentioned the following:

"We learned to be patient – not to expect things to happen immediately, but wait for the right moment to realize our goals."

"The benefits of teamwork are that different talents, skills, expertise are shared to contribute to a better execution of the project".

"Meeting new people and learning about very different lifestyles broadened our horizons and increased our intercultural competence."

"Creation is more powerful when the energies of people are united towards the achievement of a common goal."

"Developing courage to approach and discover unfamiliar territories (blog-writing in cooperation with 'strangers')."

"Good way of practicing English."

"The meeting of people with a similar mindset but different experience brought about the productivity of the team."

Conclusion

Creating global networks is one of the priorities of universities nowadays. One of the main purposes of any Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) project, including the one described above, is to create in students the perception of having mutual aims and interests as a team as opposed to proximity. Although scheduled for only six weeks, the project managed in tuning students to the needs and priorities of teamwork and made them feel responsible for the project outcome that would benefit all team members, irrespective of the degree of their contribution. This fostered in students the right attitudes to approach teamwork which, together with the other skills that were furthered or newly developed in the course of the project, enhanced their skills set. Incorporating collaborative online learning in the curriculum of universities can help students foster useful employability skills in

line with the forecasted requirements for the future workforce in which our students should be expected to be valuable members.

NOTES

1. Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the 'Future of work — acquiring of appropriate knowledge and skills to meet the needs of future jobs': https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legalcontent/BG/TXT/?uri=uriserv%3AOJ.C_.2018.237.01.0008.01.ENG&toc=OJ%3AC%3A2018%3A237%3ATOC
2. https://www.hofstede-insights.com/product/compare-countries/
3. Joint Bulgarian-Costa Rican Students Projects: an Attempt at Collaborative Online International Learning, Aneta Stefanova, Aurora Gómez Jiménez http://press.mu-varna.bg/ojs/index.php/conf/issue/view/212
4. Online Cooperation and Intercultural Learning in Higher Education, Aneta Stefanova, Aurora Gómez Jiménez, presented in the poster section of the conference Cultural Diversity, Migration and Education, July 2016 – Potsdam.

✉ **Aneta Stefanova, Senior Lecturer**
Languages Department
University of Economic – Varna
77, Knyaz Boris I Blvd.
9000 Varna, Bulgaria
E-mail: aneta_stefanova@ue-varna.bg