



Four books, four websites & four games later... What we have learned about working across cultures in a virtual world

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A member of the advisory board of the *European Business Review*, Dr. Simons is currently writing a book on diversity and intercultural issues in the EU.

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Stephanie Quappe is an experienced international change management consultant. She recently conducted Castrol's Y2K project in the Atlantic region. She continues to ready that organization's operations in Spain, Portugal and France for the changes that are occurring as the result of the introduction of the Euro.

She is currently introducing a web-based process for intercultural residence exchange and is researching the intercultural dimensions of peacekeeping and humanitarian work for in the field training.

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ABSTRACT

What are the opportunities, challenges and limitations of online cooperation in the design and creation of intercultural publications and training material? Practical tips and suggestions will be drawn from the presenters' experience of doing research and creating both printed and online materials by working electronically with colleagues around the world during the past 6 years. We will discuss the balance needed between virtual and face-to-face work, and what is required to motivate colleagues and manage projects in the virtual world.

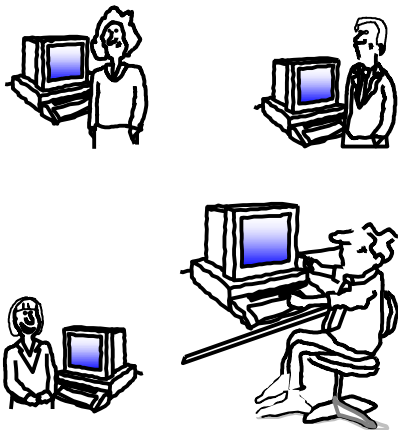
PRESENTATION

Things move fast in the virtual world. Since the filing of this proposal with SIETAR our projects have increased, multiplied and filled the earth. What we would like to do today is, firstly, provide you with an current set of learnings (from mistakes as well as successes, tips and, problem areas in working virtually as interculturalists in the writing of books, the creation of online website projects, and the development of DIVERSOPHY® training games.

Secondly we would like to go more specifically into one specific project, Peacekeeper DIVERSOPHY® which serves us as an ongoing case in online collaborative partnership that involves several steps:

- Step 1: Pulling together application USIP
- Step 2: Developing a training tool in a proprietary database
- Step 3: Publishing and using the product online

The bottom line of this presentation is: identify and use best practices for virtual working, do not reinvent the wheel!



PART A.: LEARNINGS & TIPS

Learning 1: Knowledge has an expiration date

Like milk in the grocery dairy case, knowledge can go sour. This means that it needs an expiration date, not always to tell you when it *must* be discarded, but when it *must be examined and either archived or refreshed*. This is very relevant to cultural studies. Deep culture may retain a remarkable consistency over time, but

its surface expression may alter radically, sometimes in a year or two. Classic studies need reexamination as recent work on even classic intercultural models is showing.

Tip: With the explosion of information on the web and within corporate intranets, systematic knowledge management or knowledge ecology processes are being developed. Develop or adopt such a process or system to reexamine the relevance and currency of your professional material.

Learning 2: Virtual media are not a luxury but a necessity for timely publication

We have now written four books and numerous DIVERSOPHY® training games virtually, at first via a combination of email, phone and fax, and most recently using a project website. These electronic means make it possible to cut the development time of such a project 50% or more. Given the speed of knowledge development and obsolescence mentioned above, these economies of time are necessary for up-to-date, accurate knowledge.

They also make it possible even for independent professionals to work with colleagues worldwide, often faster and more efficiently than they can in onsite development projects. Electronic work transmitted at the end of the business day in one part of the world may arrive at the beginning of the workday in the next, and can be sent back to the originating party in time for the next morning's work.

Feedback on project development and teamwork from people at different locations enhances the quality of the intercultural product and can be solicited and incorporated quickly. Writing of books in a number of professional areas is too slow for developments in the field and users are turning to consistently updated online sources. Items worth publishing in book form often need to be written within 6 months of publication. Some publishers are not geared for this and are threatened by it. Communicate carefully but strongly.

Tip: Examine your intercultural projects for those activities that can be virtualized in a cost (time, money *and culturally*) fashion.

Tip: Examine platforms and software types and versions for compatibility at the outset of a

project. Where there are differences, communicate at the lowest common denominator.

Learning 3: Websites are work-spaces

Some are factories, some are offices, some are boutiques, some are “call centers” or customer service centers, some are entertainment centers, but all organizational websites need to be thought of at some level as workplaces, or as we prefer to call them now, “work-spaces.” They are places where both members and customers and visitors come to accomplish something.

Many organizations, including intercultural professionals have chosen to have a “web presence” by setting up their own site and listing it on the search engines. Most of them are electronic versions of the brochure they would have formerly mailed to potential clients (or still do). There needs to be a reason to visit, revisit, learn from, contribute to or work on these sites for there to be real presence among ones coworkers and clients.

Tip: When thinking about developing or overhauling a site, start with your own and your coworkers needs, e.g., a section on our site at www.diversophy.com is called “useful tools.” Here we put links to currency converters, maps, etc, that we ourselves use regularly. We made our site into a work enhancement tool for others by making it one for ourselves. Be clear about what you are doing. Is it advertising, news, networking, research, production, education, or what? Make your website work for you. Then it will be easy to make it work for others.

Learning 4: Technology used to facilitate virtual team projects requires a great deal of user-friendliness but also a mental paradigm change

We learned this the hard way. With our first working site, www.intl-Partners.com, we attempted to create a virtual workspace for the ongoing development of our DIVERSOPHY® game series. Our primary obstacle was lack of understanding and skill on part of most intended users, and consequently a lack of commitment to the process. Trying to instruct users online simply complicated the problem. Even very motivated people get frustrated

when it takes more than three clicks to go where they want and do what they need to do.

Even more importantly, however, the culture of how we worked together needed to change. Participation and open information sharing, characteristic of online work require many people to rethink their sense of what is proprietary, and to examine their cultural values about how information is valued, imparted and used.

Tip: Apply what you know about culture and language to the culture of cyberspace and its language, just as you would apply them to the intercultural needs of your clients or students. Realize that technologically many of us and numerous people we work with are now living in a technological country alien to the one in which they were born. Many don't realize this yet, or if they do, hunker down in “ethnic enclaves” with minimal connectivity. For your own benefit and that of the people you work with and serve, go from known to unknown, from face-to-face to virtual. Don't just dump technology on others and expect them to joyfully embrace it. This is just as much a cultural invasion as colonization was in the past century.

Learning 5: Project-specific webs can provide necessary focus over just having an online workspace

Our next project in this regard, a book that is being published by HRD Press entitled, *Global Competence: 50 training activities for succeeding in international business*, was an outstanding success. A team of 3 editors and 25 contributors worldwide created it in a period of 5 months. The entire book and material for the accompanying CD ROM were developed on line. Using a website dedicated to this project alone and developed via Microsoft FrontPage, the editors could mark daily progress and make instant changes online. The authors could see each other's work, coordinate their efforts, avoiding repetition and harmonize their styles, without having to go through the editors. Moreover the authors could see own work in process of development, editing, make or suggest changes, and participate in editorial decisions.

We can pass on several learnings that came about by trail and error as useful tips:

Tip: Find the alternative communication route that works. It was not feasible for the editors to

communicate via the online forums set up for this purpose. This was due largely to lack of experience of the expected users with the use and protocols of online forums. Email was used as a substitute.

Tip: Assign one editor with authoring and publication rights for the entire work or to distribute authoring rights by assigning discrete sections to each author. On a website, using HTML, this is essential to avoid version confusion. If using multiple editors their range of activity should be kept discrete by assigning the work of each to a project child web.

Tip: When working a project on the web, HTML may not be the best choice for creating a text document. As we have projected a second volume of exercises in this series and have already set up a website for it, we will experiment with downloadable Word documents which should reduce the amount of formatting required for ultimately presenting the document to a publisher or production facility.

Tip: It is important to maintain multiple backups, perhaps as many as four or five levels. Errors in publishing websites can go unnoticed for quite a time in a large document and only be discovered after later versions have replaced original ones. Maintain the history of development against loss.

Tip: Carefully examine your security needs. Security via password seemed not to be necessary for our project, but we suspect will become more critical as more projects of this sort become common on the public Internet.

Learning 6: Websites and virtual working platforms are cultural entities

One of the authors of this paper is currently involved in a highly proprietary Internet startup for the management of globalization of web presence. Interculturalists need to realize that communication, language and etiquette which have taken the lion's share of the interest in the profession are too narrow to serve the globalized web. Legal practice and attitudes, politics, the nature of advertising, commerce and the sales process are more important among our clients. Many of the people currently doing this work do not conceive of themselves as interculturalists nor are they in contact with the profession or the profession with them.

This enterprise is motivated by the awareness engendered by virtual working experience that not only do e-commerce sites need to be globalized in terms of their principal targeted markets, but that virtual collaboration among interculturalists and their clients as well as online training initiatives require similar efforts at the interface of cultures.

Learning 7: Virtual activities generally need face-to-face startups

Trust and mission, the essential soft stuff of cooperation, are extremely difficult to develop without some degree of face-to-face time. Like operating systems, confidence and common purpose need to be operating in the background of the virtual work that we do. Like the data on hard disks, virtual teamwork becomes fragmented without regular face-to-face maintenance. Several of our most successful collaborations to date, (*The Cultural Diversity Sourcebook*, *The Cultural Diversity Fieldbook*, and *The Cultural Diversity Supplement*) were developed virtually but without a website. For them we used a weeklong meeting to scope out project, determine roles and responsibilities and establish a timetable. It was easy to maintain momentum and motivation once this personal and strategic foundation was in place.

Tip: Avoid the temptation to think that virtual working is only about technology or one kind of technology. Supplement online activities with face-to-face meetings, telephone and teleconferencing, etc.

Learning 8: Privacy vs. invasion

Beginning with AOL's "Buddy Lists," numerous online messaging plug-ins have appeared. They enable one to speak to others who are simultaneously online or even explore the web together. They are easy ways to carry on one-on-one, real time conversations when needed. Because they send unbidden messages directly to the screen of the recipient, unless a longer conversation is mutually agreed upon, they can be disruptive.

Tip: Imagine that you are walking down the corridor and passing the open door of a colleague. You say, "Good day," in the culturally appropriate way, and unless the person picks up the conversation with more than a return greeting, you move on. Colleagues who want privacy will signal this by closing their doors or

otherwise indicating that they desire not to be interrupted. Use online messenger services in the same way. Say hello and move on unless you have business to transact. Shut your door by closing the plug in if you don't want to be disturbed.

Learning 9: Professionals are a superstitious lot

We never cease to be amazed by the number of intercultural professionals who become the victims and perpetrators of misinformation on the web. False virus warnings and other kinds of hoaxes may serve the same function as UFO's and alien abduction in the cyberworld. They are perhaps related to fear of the unknown, serving to rein us in lest we wander too far in a strange world, and may represent a form of caring for our colleagues in alien technological contexts.

Tip: If you get a virus warning, immediately check its validity. You can do this in a minute or two by going to one of the many hoax sites on the web, e.g.,

<http://www.datafellows.com/hoaxes/wobbhoax.htm>

If it proves a hoax, care for your colleagues with a bit of "tough love." Let the sender and everyone on the cc list know about it and refer them to the URL where the hoax information is found.

If you catch a real virus, some people will view see this as carelessness and "cyberpromiscuity" on your part. You may be tempted to fix the problem but not tell others about it. As with STD's and AIDS, hiding the incidence of the virus aggravates the problem. If you catch a virus:

- Clean your system and infected files. Update virus bios if needed.
- Warn those you have potentially affected. Provide them with the information on how to eliminate the virus.

Learning 10: International intercultural bawdiness abounds

Much like bathtub gin in the era of alcoholic Prohibition in the 1920's USA, politically incorrect humor flourishes on the Internet and in email among consenting adults of both sexes, including leading purveyors of diversity and intercultural initiatives.

Tip: Without wearing the manacles of US style political correctness or censorship, a certain caution is advisable here. As demographics in the EU move its institutions more in the direction of North American style diversity initiatives, this may become more of an issue.

Learning 11: Learn how to do what you need to do or hire a professional

We have done both, and prefer for most projects to learn how to do what we need to do except for very discreet technical interventions. People who know both culture and HTML are pretty rare, though their number is growing. There is no tip here except that SIETAR should promote opportunities for this marriage of skills to avoid marginalization of the profession.

PART B: PEACEKEEPER DIVERSOPHY® — A VIRTUAL PARTNERSHIP

Background

Stephanie Quappe who works as project manager for intercultural change management projects met George Simons at the Young SIETAR Conference in Brussels in October 1999. They decided to cooperate in developing a version of DIVERSOPHY® for peacekeepers and humanitarian workers. To assure accurate market targeting and additional resources, they applied for sponsorship by the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and created a virtual alliance with Justice Solutions, an organization in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada. Justice solutions is a for-profit organization specializing in training and training materials for the Canadian Department of Defence, as well as for police and peacekeepers in trouble spots, largely in the Middle East.

DIVERSOPHY® (full information is available at www.diversophy.com) is a trademarked product of George Simons International and a recognized training tool for intercultural communication. It functions as an interactive preparation activity or course for individuals or groups who need to learn about culture-specific differences. Peacekeeper DIVERSOPHY® is tar-

geted at humanitarian personnel sent to peacekeeping missions, and is likely to focus on the Balkan Region. It is designed first and foremost to be a portable, in-the-field training tool for continuing education. De facto, the USIP failed to support the project in the current round of grants, so the cooperation between the remote partners continues without them.

We shall use this virtual partnership, still in progress to illustrate learnings about the pros and cons of virtual working on such a project. We will also use it in this presentation to start an open discussion forum and an exchange of ideas on virtual working as well as intercultural peacekeeper training. We invite participants and readers after the SIETAR Congress to contact the speakers if they are interested in a virtual cooperation on Peacekeeper DIVERSOPHY® or would like to share contacts or resources related to this issue.

In the course of this project, Quappe and Simons planned to work virtually in three phases: 1) assembling the application form for USIP grant, 2) developing the training tool online via a database located on an internet site, and 3) to use the training tool on CD ROM, organizational servers or Internet sites. At the time of this presentation, phase one is complete, and phase two is underway.

Phase 1: Assembling the application

This initial part of the project consisting in pulling together, agreeing to, and producing a 30-page application document. This was done in the face of a very tight deadline between two people who had never worked together before. The first steps involved a steep learning curve. They were dogged by trial and error, not being able to open attachments coming via email, and getting "mailer demon" messages.

Face-to-face time consisted of only one day of cooperation on the project parameters and a visit to a wine fair. We mention the fair specifically because off-work activities such as this are critical even to two low-context individuals who could communicate fluently in several languages to create a working relationship, particularly when they are essentially a partnership without other principal contributors in the day-to-day effort. The temptation, when time is short, is to focus on task, when what will sustain the project is quality of relationship. Additionally, some of us adapt better to work-

ing virtually for long periods, while for others it is like the "loneliness of the long distance runner," and we need more forms of interpersonal nourishment. This seems to be a matter of personality type as well as of culture.

In the press of time the most critical early step was to determine the lowest common denominator of technology shared by the partners. Incompatible but necessary applications between various formats of Windows and Lotus applications were communicated by using shareware like Adobe Acrobat. Other strategies that helped clarity and efficiency included:

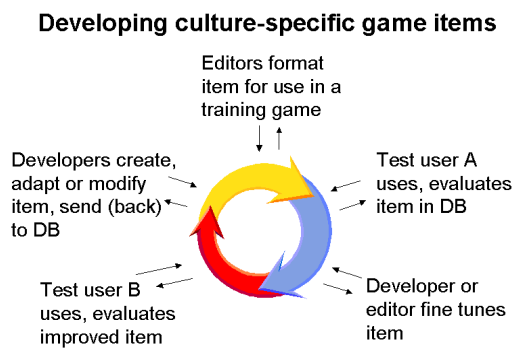
- Specifying abbreviations to be used in the subject line of email messages so that the intention and contents of each mail or document exchange was clear from the outset
- Using version numbers for updated documents
- Consolidating work by phone, in the absence of the face-to-face meeting weekly meeting that would normally be required for an intense work schedule such as this. This had the additional advantage of increasing the partners' comfort zone with each other. Many virtual workers need to resist the temptation to ignore the phone, because "they should be able to do it online."
- Deliberately positioning the adventure of virtual work as a fun learning experience with challenges, detours and mistakes, an adventure to experiment with and enjoy.

Phase 2: Creating a developers' database

The second virtual working challenge in this project concerns data gathering for the content and dynamics of the Peacekeepers DIVERSOPHY® training package. In the same format as former DIVERSOPHY® games (roughly 200 culture-specific items of information), peacekeeper-relevant questions and answers will be developed by a virtual team in different locations and collocated by directly accessing a database on the Internet.

The database is intended to work via different access levels for developers, editors and customers (users). It is a living document in which feedback can directly be integrated into the knowledge base and customers retrieve the information tailor-made to their specific needs as well as provide feedback on its use.

as well as provide feedback on its use. From a technical point of view, the setting up of access levels for specific parts of the database requires careful planning and timely virtual cooperation on the part of developers, editors and test users. The diagram below shows how this cycle might work in the development of a culture-specific item of knowledge and its adaptation to a new application.



The current DIVERSOPHY® database has not been used online by International Partners due to various reasons, mainly incompatibility of local and remote server technology and uncertainty about information ownership. The learning curve involved in creating the Peacekeeper

DIVERSOPHY® database will provide both technological solutions and virtual working competence for future application. It will serve not only this product but other projects involving the management of culture-specific information and the development of culture-specific work enhancement tools.

Phase 3: Online training delivery

Peacekeeper DIVERSOPHY® training is planned to be deliverable in various formats: as an in-the field training instrument in the classical format of a paper card-based game; on CD ROM for Peacekeeper pre-assignment training. Derivatives of this CD ROM can either assist or be integrated into a LAN (local area network) or uploaded for interactive use on the Internet or on organizational intranets. We expect the focus of learnings about virtual working in this phase to largely occur in the area of online learning technology. The current rapid development of this field and the involvement of cellular as well as computer-based training prevent us from speculating with any precision even a number of months in advance.