

TQEF PROJECT: FINAL REPORT

1. Project title

Transnational internet debate about European & national identities.

Problems of working in International European contexts

2. Details of project team

Project Leader:

Dr Mark Wise, Jean Monnet Chair, School of Geography.

Partners in other Universities:

Prof. Dr Matthias Hutz, Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg, Germany

Prof. Jacques Fache, Université de Nantes, France

Prof. Régis Guillaume, Université de Toulouse, France

Prof. John Ford, Centre Universitaire Champollion, Albi, France

Prof. Marie-Françoise Labouz, Université de Versailles-St Quentin, France

Prof. Carmen Garcia, Universidad de Castilla la Mancha, Spain

Prof. Marto Redondo Madrigal, Universidad de Castilla la Mancha, Spain

Prof. Cosimo Palagiano, La Sapienza University, Rome, Italy

Prof. Sophie Vanwambeke, Université de Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium

Also students participate from: University of Vilnius, Lithuania, University of Brno, Czech Republic and University of Moscow (organised by John Sallnow)

Project assistant:

Louis Wise: Responsible for:

- producing translations on website, of blog information and questionnaires in English, French, German, Spanish & Italian;
- collecting and organizing Email addresses of students from participant universities across Europe so that they could be invited to participate;;
- organizing, managing and graphically presenting quantitative and qualitative information produced by participants on the blog;
- miscellaneous administrative tasks; etc

Technical Assistants:

Liz Thomson, Rob Giles and Jacqui Palmer; Computing Officers, PBS Specialist IT Team. Responsible for:

- technical help in setting up and designing the transnational website & blog;
- finding and incorporating on-line translation tools;
- devising data collection systems on the blog (e.g. from multilingual questionnaire, etc)
- helping to manage and present data produced on the blog;
- helping to present project at University of Plymouth Elearning conferences in July 2008 and July 2009 (production of posters, etc).

3. Summary of the aims of the project

The project was designed:

- to develop an ongoing transnational debate among students in diverse European countries about the nature of European and national identities;

- to develop an understanding of the cultural and linguistic problems associated with such transnational debates and the difficulties of international communication in general;

These aims were related to Mark Wise's:

- **teaching** of modules (undergraduate and graduate) about the European Union and efforts to integrate Europe into some kind of political-economic entity; and his
- **research** on language problems and policies linked to transnational communication in the European Union.

4. Methods used

- **Cooperative links were established** with university colleagues in universities in: France (Toulouse, Bordeaux, Nantes, Versailles); Belgium (Louvain-la-Neuve); Germany (Freiburg, Potsdam-Berlin); Spain (Castilla-la-Mancha); Lithuania (Vilnius); Finland (Turku); Czech Republic (Prague). This was done in order to find students ready to participate in on-line internet activities together to support their studies in their respective universities. The basic idea was to extend discussions and other activities beyond the national confines of classrooms in each country and establish an ongoing transnational debate, supported by other shared activities, among all of these students by using the internet.
- **A multilingual website was created to facilitate these transnational activities.** This website was presented in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian and was confidential in nature; in other words students could only participate if invited by the project leader and their comments could only be read by those registered as participants. The website:
 - introduced the participating students to the project in their various languages;
 - explained how to log-on in order to participate;
 - set up a blog to facilitate the debate;
 - incorporated an number of computerised translation tools and online dictionaries in order to help solve the problems of multilingual communication (N.B. one aim of the project was to confront students with the problem of multilingual, transnational communication and to assess the usefulness of such automatic translation tools).
- **An introductory multilingual questionnaire** was carried out with students in all the participating countries in order to produce data in order to start the debate about European and national identities. To maximise participation, the questionnaire was multilingual and generated both quantitative and qualitative data which was processed for students to use in the debate and in producing their related coursework assignment. Once the initial debate was underway, students were invited to pose related questions for debate; for example:
 - 'Should the EU adopt English as its official common language?';

- `What do you think are the defining features of your national identity?`;
- `Are all Europeans adopting a common American culture?`
- and so on.

In other words, students were encouraged to promote discussion themes of particular interest to them, although they had to be related to the work of the modules they were taking.

- **An obligatory coursework assignment** was based on the data/debate produced on the transnational website (questionnaire results/blog discussion). In the first year of operation, student participation was voluntary, but in the second year an obligatory assignment was incorporated into Dr Wise's module (GGH2134: The European Union). This required students to analyse the data generated on the website in order to identify what they perceived to be the major characteristics of the debate about European and national identity; for example, did most British students view themselves as `non-European` while most students in continental Europe perceive themselves as European in addition to their national identity? etc.

5. Number of students involved

The confidential website blog used restricted the number of active participants to 100 in each year. Therefore, there were 100 students in 2007-08 and another 100 in 2008-09; total 200. In each year, there were about 40 students from my EU modules in the University of Plymouth and about 60 students from the participating universities elsewhere in Europe.

6. Findings/ outcomes/ impacts

- **General conclusion:** Over the two years of its operation, the project was successful and achieved its main aims of:
 - bringing students from different countries into a transnational debate about European and national identities in a manner which enhanced their knowledge and understanding of topics being dealt with in their modules and enriched their educational experience in an original way;
 - making students more aware of the problems involved in debate across linguistic and national boundaries in Europe.
- **Strengths of the project:**
 - **Substantial participation by students.** Contributions from UK, France, Germany, Spain, Lithuania, Italy, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Sweden.
 - **Genuine and continuous on-line discussions** developed between several participants over several weeks.

- **Generation of some 80,000 words of debate.** Nearly 200 pages of A4 produced over the two years.
 - **High quality of serious debate;** no 'silly' or offensive contributions. Although good humour formed part of the exchanges, students participated in a very mature manner.
 - **Generation of quantitative & qualitative data** from multilingual online questionnaire and blog debate contributions.
 - **Provided valuable complement to lectures, seminars and reading for modules being taken by students.** For example, students studying the EU in Plymouth gained further and genuine insights into difficulties of European integration in these direct exchanges with their peers in other countries. Similarly, students studying Europe and the English language in continental countries were confronted with the reality of modern English employed by some British undergraduates. Some British undergraduates were stimulated to start learning another language.
 - **Strengthening of more general links between participating universities.** This was particularly true in the case of links between the University of Plymouth and the Pädagogische Hochschule Freiburg in Germany.
- **Weaknesses of the project**
 - **Uneven participation:** students some countries participated more than others.
 - **Some non-English speakers reluctant to participate,** despite invitation to use their national languages. They sometimes felt embarrassed to use their national language in a world where they feel that 'everyone has to speak English'. Therefore, they would try to write in English even if their grasp of the language was poor or chose not to participate at all. Need strong leadership from staff in participant countries to overcome this problem.
 - **Students reluctant to participate if no assessment** of their contributions; this is a characteristic common to all European countries!
 - **Too many invitations tend to block discussion;** some students overwhelmed and 'hide' in the mass; did not bother to participate.
 - **The mass of material on the blog becomes difficult to manage:** despite reluctance of some students to participate, the mass of text becomes difficult to organise, assimilate and synthesise.
 - **Difficult to control the blog discussion** as it branches in different directions (but is this really a problem?).
 - **Student fears of being 'right' or 'wrong'.** Some students not used to open critical discussion and exchange of conflicting views even on a restricted, confidential blog. A small number stated that they were worried about being 'politically incorrect'!

- **Not all students at ease with computers!** Problems of logging on (despite clear multilingual instructions) and contributing to the blog in the correct manner proved more difficult for some students than anticipated! That said, the majority logged on with relative ease.
 - **Difficulty of coping with problems in universities in other participating countries.** In particular, strikes in the participating French universities which lasted for most of (all of in some cases) the second-term drastically reduced the anticipated contribution from French students. However, this did not defeat the project because a large number of contributions were collected nonetheless, including some excellent ones from France.
- **Some findings made by students in blog-based assessment**
 - Students from continental Europe tended to perceive themselves as Europeans (as well as French, German, etc) more than British students who often felt no sense of European identity and tended to see themselves as solely 'English' or 'Welsh' (not even British).
 - Students from continental Europe tended to focus more on political, social & cultural elements of integration than UK students who tended to focus on economic questions.
 - Students also gained an understanding that opinions/interests varied within national groups. For example, there were sharp divisions among British students about their 'European identity' and 'Americanisation'. This made them more critical of common formulations such as 'the Germans think this' and 'the French think that' and the 'the British are like this', etc.
 - Students therefore became more aware that opinions/interests are also shared across national groups. For example, a strong and common desire to maintain their national identities was expressed by students from all countries. Also, some students in all countries embraced 'Americanisation' while some resisted it.
 - Students became aware that there were common criticisms of the European Union across all the countries involved. Anti-EU feelings are not confined to the UK and pro-EU sentiments can be found in the UK as well as within continental Europe.
 - Students discovered that difficulties of transnational communication associated with linguistic diversity in Europe are significant. For example, it was evident that 'everyone does NOT speak English' and that many who do speak it as a second language write it with difficulty. Also, a reluctance to use any language other than English in transnational communication also manifested itself, even, to some people's surprise, among

French speakers who sometimes felt obliged to use English even when encouraged to write in French. The exercise challenged many national stereotypes, albeit while reinforcing others. Students gained an insight into the complex diversity of attitudes and interests in all EU countries.

- British students were extremely impressed by the high English-language skills of some of their continental peers.
- Some British students also became aware of the problems they have in writing clear, formal and grammatically correct English when communicating with non-native English speakers.
- Most continental European students, while stressing the need to protect their own national languages, felt that they must learn English to work in the modern world! But the project also showed how difficult/impossible this will be for many to achieve.
- The experience gave some UK students the desire to start learning a foreign language again!

- **Use of the automatic translation tools online**

As expected the limitations of such tools were apparent in some incomprehensible examples of translation. But, in general, they proved more effective than anticipated, especially between English and French. In brief, such tools are helpful when people trying to communicate do not know each other's language. It was concluded that some communication, often better than expected, is better than no communication across national-linguistic boundaries. It obviously helps if those involved have some knowledge of the other language as well.

Clearly, these translation tools work best when the participants write in short sentences using formal and grammatically correct language. Many British students find it difficult to do this and tend to write in poorly structured, poorly punctuated and colloquial English.

Example of colloquial versus formal use of language:

Colloquial 'journalistic', 'management-speak' style produces:

- 'Going forward Eurocrats told people will not sign up to beefed-up EU Treaty'; they can stuff it!

which translated badly into French by automatic translation tool as:

- 'Pour l'avenir eurocrates dit personnes ne signera pas jusqu'à renforcé UE-traité», mais ils peuvent stuff!'

(Note however that translation tools evolve and deal quite well with phrases such as 'going forward' and 'beefed up')

But the formally written

- `In the future, Eurocrats are informed that the general public will not accept a Treaty requiring more integration. They must abandon it!
is translated clearly and correctly into French by automatic translation tool as:
- «Dans l'avenir, eurocrates sont informés que le grand public n'acceptera pas un traité exigeant une plus grande intégration. Ils doivent l'abandonner»

Actual examples of automatic translations on the blog.

- **French student originally writes in French:**

Je me sens à la fois européen et français, parfois un peu plus français qu'européen, et parfois l'inverse.

Culturellement, mes références sont françaises, ma langue est le français et ma manière de réfléchir est très... française! Je suis capable de comprendre une grève qui paralyse le pays, d'être parfaitement indiscipliné, d'être chauvin dans un stade, et de rêver que la France sera un jour championne du monde de rugby!

Très sérieusement, les multiples voyages que j'effectue en Europe me font comprendre tout ce qu'il y a de typiquement français en moi.

Mais dans le même temps, mes voyages m'amènent à toujours trouver dans les pays que je visite des lieux dans lesquels le me sens bien, dans lesquels je pourrais me sentir chez moi si j'avais la possibilité d'y vivre. J'ai eu ce sentiment aussi bien en Toscane, que dans certains coins de Londres, du Danemark (Odense, Aarhus...), d'Espagne (certains quartiers de Séville), d'Allemagne...

Ces lieux me plaisent avant tout par les personnes qui y vivent, par leurs rythmes de vie, leurs usages... C'est le rythme complètement décalé des Espagnols; le sens de la vie collective dans certaines villes danoises; la capacité à s'auto-organiser des italiens... Mais surtout, c'est le contact que j'ai pu avoir, qui a très souvent été positif. Je n'ai pas le souvenir d'avoir été rejeté par une personne que j'abordais, et qui avait autre chose à faire.

Dans ce sens, la question de la culture est certes importante, et la barrière linguistique peu gêner et ralentir les échanges...

En déplacement, je n'ai jamais hésité à tenter de parler à un autochtone pour x raisons. Je ne sais jamais ce que cela peut donner, mais à la fin, on trouve toujours un moyen de se faire comprendre.

J'ai donc sans ambiguïté le sentiment d'être européen.
February 6, 2008 6:07 PM

- **The automatic online translation tool on the blog website instantly translates this original French text into English as follows:**

I feel both European and french, sometimes a little more french and European, and sometimes the reverse.

Culturally, my references are French, my language is french and my way of thinking is very ... French! I am able to understand a strike which paralysed the country, to be perfectly undisciplined, to be chauvinistic in a stadium, and dream that France will one day be world champion rugby!

Very seriously, I make multiple trips to Europe make me understand what is typically french to me.

*But at the same time, my travels lead me to always find in countries that I visit places where I feel good, where I could feel my house (**n.b feel at home**) if I had the opportunity to live there. I had this feeling both in Tuscany, that in some corners of London, Denmark (Odense, Aarhus ...), Spain (some districts of Seville), Germany ...*

*These places I like above all by people who live there, their lifestyles, their use ... It's completely shifted the pace of Spaniards (**i.e. the completely different daily rhythm of Spanish life**), the sense of collective life in some Danish cities, the ability to self-organize Italian (**i.e. the ability of Italians to organise themselves**) ... But most importantly, it is the contact I have had, which has often been very positive. I do not recall having been rejected by a person that I covered (**i.e. approached in order to talk**), and had other things to do ...*

*In this sense, the question of culture is certainly important, and the language barrier and interfere little slow trade (**n.b. ... can hinder and slow down exchanges**)....*

*On the move (**i.e. when travelling**), I never hesitated to try to talk to an Aboriginal (**n.b. local inhabitant from `autochtone`**) for x reasons (**n.b French colloquial expression for `several reasons**). I never know what it can give, but in the end, it always finds a way to make themselves understood.*

I therefore unambiguous sense of being European.

- **German student originally writes in German..**

`Hallo allerseits!

In den 24 Jahren meines Lebens war ich stets an der „Europäischen Idee“ interessiert und fühle mich mehr europäisch als alles andere. Dafür möchte ich euch hier ein paar Gründe nennen:

- *Meine Nationalität ist Deutsch, aber meine Wurzeln sind außerdem jüdisch, Ukrainisch und Russisch.*

- *Nach der Schule absolvierte ich ein Freiwilliges Soziales Jahr in Russland, kam zum Studium zurück nach Deutschland und nun bin ich in Großbritannien mit einem Erasmus-Stipendium der Europäischen Union.*
- *Für mich ist Identität nicht die Sprache, die Währung oder der Ort an dem ich gerade bin – diese Dinge sind nur Werkzeuge und Phasen. Wichtiger sind Familie, Bildung, Freunde, Freizeit und Politik – in meinem Fall dominiert bei europäischen Einflüssen.*
- *Einige von euch sagen, Identität ist vielschichtig. Das ist richtig, aber wir sind Studenten und bereit, die Welt zu erobern. Lasst uns auf der Suche nach neuen Abenteuern die Ebenen auch mal wechseln. Und um ehrlich zu sein, es ist aufregender und inspirierender europäisch zu leben, als am bekannten Geburtsort zu bleiben. Du musst gehen, um wieder zurückkommen zu können!*
- *Europa ist ein Arbeitsmarkt für qualifizierte Kräfte. Freunde von mir sind bereits nach Skandinavien gegangen, aufgrund eines höheren Einkommens und der unberührten Natur.*

Als junge Erwachsene kreieren wir unsere eigene Identität. Es ist wichtig, seine Herkunft zu kennen, seine Verhältnisse dann aber auch zu entwickeln und den Horizont zu erweitern!‘

Identität ist nicht statisch’.

The automatic translation tool translated this from German into English as:

‘Hello everyone!

In the 24 years of my life I was always at the "European idea" interested and feel more European than anything else. I would like you here are a few reasons:

- *My nationality is German, but my roots are Jewish, Ukrainian and Russian.*
- *After school I studied a voluntary social year in Russia, came to study back to Germany and now I'm in the UK with an Erasmus grant from the European Union.*
- *For me, identity is not the language, currency or the place where I'm just - these things are just tools and phases. More important are family, education, friends, leisure and politics - in my case dominated by European influences.*
- *Some of you say, identity is complex. That is true, but we are students and ready to conquer (i.e. discover) the world. Let us in search of new adventures the planes sometimes. And to be honest, it is exciting and inspiring Europe to live, known as the birthplace to stay. You have to go to return to!*
- *Europe is a labour market for skilled workers. Friends of mine have already gone to Scandinavia, having a higher income and pristine nature.*

As young adults we create our own identity. It is important to know his origins, his relationships but also to develop and expand the horizon! ‘

Identity is not static.’

Conclusions about use of translation tools

- **Train students how to use language in transnational communication by teaching them to:**
 - Write in clear formal English which is free of slang, in-group jargon, abbreviations and spelling mistakes.
 - Use short, simple and properly punctuated sentences.
 - Avoid lyrical, poetical and rhetorical language.
 - Avoid obscure national proverbs and sayings.
 - Be explicit rather than implicit in written style; try not to be too subtle!

7. Continuation/ dissemination plans

I have now retired from the University. However, if I were still teaching, I would continue to incorporate this sort of transnational activity facilitated by internet into my courses on European integration. It provides an excellent means of extending the student learning experience beyond the confines of the classroom on a particular campus in a particular country.

The advantages of such exercises to enrich courses dealing with Europe, international relations and languages are obvious. However, I see no reason why such direct exchanges with staff and students in other countries should not enhance courses in many disciplines including geography, history, economics, business studies and the sciences in general.

General advice to those interested in continuing such transnational activities.

- **Do not involve too many students:** It is difficult to manage contributions from some 100 students in different countries. Also students can feel overwhelmed by too many responses. It is best to have relatively small groups (maximum 40?). If the group of students to be taught is large, I suggest that it be broken down into a series of smaller groups doing the same exercise in parallel or pursuing different, albeit related tasks. For example, in this case, some students could have discussed the question of European identity, others examine national identity while others investigate the language problem in transnational communication. Some effort was made to do this in the second year of the project.
- **Make sure that academic staff from partner universities play a truly active role in the project.** This can be difficult, but the best results occur when colleagues actively require –rather than just

request- their students to participate in a way which contributes to their course assessment.

- **Define a restricted and clearly defined period of time** for the activity. It is easier to maintain momentum and participation rates if the exercise does not persist for too long. Students and staff have other things to do.
- **Make sure that student participation leads to an assessment as an integral part of the module in all the participating institutions.** Appeals to student 'idealism' and 'general interest' have limited effect. This applies to all European countries.
- **Try to develop joint assessments** requiring students from the different participating countries working together
- **Try to organise a meeting of participating students** from different countries in a common location at end of project (e.g. visit to European Parliament)

Dissemination

I plan to disseminate my experience by writing articles for organisations such as:

- **GEES Subject Centre** (Geography, Earth and Environmental Sciences) based in University of Plymouth. Article in Planet - the bi-annual publication of the GEES Subject Centre.
- **HERODOT** . EU-funded 'Thematic Network for Geography Teaching and Training'. Based in University of Plymouth.
- **Journal of Geography in Higher Education**

I would be very prepared to discuss the teaching potential of such transnational projects with interested colleagues, be they in the University of Plymouth or elsewhere.

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