Babel in the international café: A respectful critique

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Abstract. This paper reflects on the case of participants with different first languages conversing in "The International Café" in an online workshop about Communities of Practice. It describes the context of the café within the workshop and an informal translation experiment designed to bring together community members with different first languages. In the light of this experiment the paper critically reflects on the effectiveness of translation for negotiating meaning in international community conversations. It discusses the value of cultivating global literacies where language is considered not as a technical issue requiring translation equivalence, but as something that shapes individual and collective worldviews, where the fine-tuning and exploration of situated meanings of people with different first languages is viewed as integral to the process of interacting, learning and sharing knowledge in an international community. The reflections highlight a connected issue of time: for participating in, facilitating and designing for such conversations. Finally, international conversations in the café are contextualised as part of a broader issue of clarifying the purpose and principles behind cultivating a truly international online community workshop. Four key issues arising from this reflective critique are tentatively offered as inter-connected design factors for international online community environments.

Introduction

> Every time the question of language surfaces, in one way or another, it means that a series of other problems are coming to the fore. (Antonio Gramsci, 1935)

Online communities are increasingly international in character. The synergies of people with locally situated knowledge from different national cultural contexts offer substantial and creative opportunities to inform and shape the processes of knowledge creation and learning in international communities. However, if we take the view that situated knowledge is embedded in language, then a question arises about what we could be losing in an international, multilingual community that is negotiating and sharing meaning only in one language.

This paper studies a small but significant informal experiment where participants in the café of a community workshop "spoke" in their first language, and where the posting was quickly translated into three other languages of fellow participants. Such an experience might have been expected to result in the encompassing and extending of different worldviews and different local knowledge. However, a reflection on the process of this experience does not necessarily lead us to conclude that it did. Rather, it leads us to consider that while negotiating meaning in unilingual groups is already a complex issue, further complicated by the challenges of communicating online, the complexity of meaning-making is significantly amplified in a dispersed community with members conversing in different national languages.

The paper begins by describing this international café experiment in the context of the online workshop, then discusses the limitations of translation as a means of negotiating meaning, and finally goes on to explore some of the connected issues that arose from the experience.

Methodology

Data was collected in the form of semi-structured reflections from members of the café organising group and from café participants, followed by respondent validation. This informal experiment is offered as a retrospective reflection as it was not set up as a research inquiry from the start. Only after the event had taken place was it decided that the experience merited a deeper reflection and analysis. Data collection was thus limited to those participants who responded to an invitation to collaborate in the reflection one month after the end of the community workshop. Throughout this paper the words of participants and organisers of the café are represented in italics, indented and identified with a

person's initials, illustrating the different voices of the collaborators in the reflection. The initials of participants who completed their reflections anonymously are indicated by XX.

The café in context

The location of the café was at a space in WebCrossing during a seven-week workshop on Foundations of Communities of Practice (CoP) offered by CPSquare. The workshop, the tenth since its inception, has as its principle market people from the business community, and over the years has seen an increasing number of participants from outside the US from English and non-English speaking countries. Activities such as the "six degrees of separation" (based on the premise that everyone in the world can be linked to any other person by six other people or less) whereby participants discover how closely they are connected with a group of fellow participants have helped enrich the character of international relationships in the workshop. The process of internationalisation continues to be an important concern for the workshop organisers.

Last year, for the first time, a parallel workshop in Dutch was carried out during the same weeks as the main, English language, workshop. The organisers of this workshop planned and independently ran a workshop, adapting the main workshop's content and activities to their local context and market. The connecting space between the Dutch and the main parallel workshop was based on the metaphor of an international café, where it was expected that people from both workshops could come together and socialise in a relaxed, informal environment. This model is being extended later this year for a third parallel workshop to take place in Italian, where the café will be the bridge between the three different workshops.

This year, in the spirit of innovation characterising the workshop, the informal translation experiment took place with every message being translated into three other languages ("signed" by the translator). Everyone would post their message in their first language. The message was then translated (sometimes by the writers themselves) into Dutch, English, French and Spanish. The translation should take place as soon as possible after the original message was posted. The following two screen shots gives an indication of the welcome to participants as they entered the international café and the way in which a message appeared in the four languages:

Fig. 1 The welcome message in the international café

Fig. 2 A message in four languages

Responsibility for doing the translations was voluntary, although the members of the organising team were strongly encouraged to take it on. Of the sixty eight messages in the café:

- All were translated into at least two other languages.
- Eight messages were not translated into three other languages..
- Seventeen messages were posted in two languages by their author.
- Three messages (from two people) were posted in three languages by their author.
- Three messages were written in English (as a second language) and translated back into the author's first language.
- Two messages were only posted in one language by (English) bi-lingual authors.
- Four individuals voluntarily did approximately forty-five of the translations.

At the end of the café the interactions that took place were summarised by an organising team member who attempted to draw together the main themes of the messages. These themes were:

(1) Traduttori, traditori (the translator, a traitor)?
(2) Use of English as an international language.
(3) Language and culture.
(4) Questions and issues raised.

Although the summary of the international café was written in English, the words of participants were woven into the text in the original language of their posting.

Searching for a translation equivalence or *le génie de la langue*[1]**?**

I was surprised at how difficult it was to translate. (JS, 2003)

It is not uncommon for people to view translation as merely a “technical” exercise that involves searching for a linguistic equivalent to particular words and phrases. As in our experiment in the international café, translation is seen as a useful instrument for overcoming language barriers and helping to connect people with different first languages.

However, translation equivalence is more complicated than it may at first appear. Sechrest et al (cited in Usunier, 1998:49-50) identify four different translation equivalences:

(l) exical equivalence (dictionary translation);
(2) idiomatic equivalence;
(3) grammatical-syntactical equivalence (particularly word order); *and*

[1] The *spirit* of the language.

(4) experiential equivalence, or what words and sentences mean for people in their everyday experiences.

Whereas the efforts at translation in the café may have helped to express lexical and grammatical-syntactical equivalence and, to some extent, idiomatic equivalence, the work of translating *experiential equivalence* would have been out of the realms of the translators' remit. Yet it is precisely this experiential equivalence that we could imagine an emerging international community would want and need to explore in their conversations.

An even stronger criticism of translation in the international café would have come from Sapir and Whorf, two influential linguists at the beginning of the 20th century, whose argument was based on the premise that language shapes individual and collective worldviews (rather than being shaped by them). Furthermore, those mental maps and structures that correspond to our worldview, our *Weltanschauung*, are determined by the way language creates categories in our minds, directly influencing our construction of reality. Sapir states in a widely cited passage: "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar as to be considered as representing the same social reality. The worlds in which different societies live are distinct worlds, not merely the same world with different labels attached." (Sapir, 1929:214)

Thus, a Sapir-Whorf perspective would hold that translation is at the very least problematic, if not impossible, especially if our goal is to understand meaning as embedded in different worldviews. Translation is deceptive, giving the idea that the "other" is engaged in the same activity as we are – only in a different language. While this view may be underestimating the helpfulness of a good translation, it does remind us of the possible reductionism of viewing international communication as dependent on translated texts. All the more so if we hold that meaning does not reside in the text itself, but rather in the *interpretation* of the text, which in turn is influenced by the socio-cultural context in which the text is both written and read.

This brings us briefly to an aspect of current social semiotic theory, which takes the perspective that language is a system of meaning that is created by a culture (where culture is a social system). Hence, trying to understand the meaning of someone's words *in their cultural context* is important for understanding a person's way of seeing, thinking and acting. Fairclough, writing on semiotic aspects of learning, refers to text (written and spoken) as a social event (2003:2). He refers to what people learn *in* and *through* texts and talk as "texturing" (ibid.:5). Furthermore, he claims that what people learn "in and through the process of texturing … is not merely (new) ways of texturing, but also new ways of acting, relating, being and intervening in the material world" (ibid.). Relating this to the issue of translating in the international café, we might reflect on how translating, rather than texturing, may in fact be ignoring the need

to try and understand the cultural context in which the language is situated, and thus missing an opportunity to learn through it. An interesting reflection by one of the Dutch members of the organising team shows a growing realisation of the complexity of translating and of possible over-simplification in reading translated texts. These emerging insights would have been lost on the majority of people who were only reading the finished translation, rather than being involved in the co-construction of its meaning:

> I thought firstly that the job I was doing (translating) was just an extra task that had to be done. While translating I became suddenly aware that I was reading the messages differently … I was reading them more closely. The insight for me was that in the international discussions I should be more aware of my reading style. (MC, organising team member, 2003)

Likewise, a reflection from a Spanish speaking participant/translator:

> Translating postings, especially others', demanded a greater attention to what people were writing. (PN, workshop participant, 2003)

A pragmatist like Usunier, a researcher of cross-cultural management, warns that even a good translation offers only an illusion of sharing in the same vision of reality. His advice could usefully be adapted in many cross-cultural settings. He proposes that, where possible, words should be kept in their original form to recognise the culturally unique concepts represented by the language. He advocates "linguistic polycentrism", offering three practical ways to encourage this, by:

(1) trying to keep words in their original language, where possible (as we did in the summary document of the international café);
(2) understanding meaningful elements in the grammar (such as gender, tense, sentence construction); and
(3) trying to behave as 'explorers' of the meanings and worldviews expressed by different languages. (1998:59)

The role of participants as explorer will be picked up later in the paper, but first we should consider the nature and purpose of online conversations, particularly in relation to multilingual context of the international café.

Cultivating International Online Conversations

An important question arises about whether or not translating messages facilitates the type of conversations we would like to be cultivating in the international café. Over several years Sherry (2000) has been writing about the nature and purpose of different types of online conversation. Drawing on the work of Jenlink and Carr (1996), she indicates a taxonomy of online conversations: dialectic,

discussion, dialogue and design. If we look at each of these types of conversation we may conclude that translation may be more appropriate for certain types of conversation in an international café than for others.

Dialectic conversation focuses on framing a logical argument for expressing the truth where "(t)he nature of the dialectic conversation is one of debate and logical argument within a context of limited negotiations for change" (Sherry 2000:5) We could imagine a good translation being helpful in these conversations for presenting clearly articulated arguments from all sides of the debate.

Discussion conversation is a forum for people to advocate their own individual point of view. It is different from dialectic in that it is more influenced by personal opinion and supposition and where the conversations "are transactional in nature" (ibid.). Translation may be more difficult in this type of conversation given the subjective and evolving nature of people's positions in a discussion.

Dialogue conversation is where meaning is constructed through sharing and negotiating. It is "a community-building form of conversation" and "its purpose is to create a setting where conscious collective mindfulness can be maintained" (ibid.). Sherry also relates dialogue conversation to Bereiter's concept of "progressive discourse" which involves "creating commonly shared meanings and constructing a shared purpose" (2000:6).

In a dialogue conversation we might question how effective it really is to have translations of conversation members' interactions for jointly constructing meaning. Rather, careful consideration by the conversation members (not just consideration by the translators, which is what happened in the café) of the meaning and interpretation of their own and other's words (and worlds) would be an important aspect of taking on a "conscious collective mindfulness". The role of conversation members would be more as 'explorers' of the meanings and worldviews expressed in different languages (suggested by Usunier), rather than merely responding to postings of translated points of view.

Design conversation is goal related and concerned with creating something new. There is a close relationship between dialogue and design conversations except that design conversation "goes beyond the suspension of personal opinions and moves into a suspension of mindsets themselves" (ibid.:6). A design conversation involves "shifts in the very ground on which they stand, transforming and expanding their sense of self, and deepening their capacity to hear and inquire into perspectives vastly different from their own." (ibid.) This combination of tangible outcome and a shift in mindsets suggests an expansion of both tacit and explicit knowledge of conversation participants.

In short, *texturing* in a design conversation deepens an individual's capacity to listen and explore perspectives that are very different from their own and, through the process of creating something new, is capable of transforming a person's *Weltanschauung*. It follows from this that a design conversation requires an

understanding of the socio-cultural elements of communication of meaning, which goes well beyond mere technical competences of translation.

The potential depth of a dialogue conversation and the transformative value of a design conversation would clearly be at odds with short, easily translatable postings. However, quite early on in the international café the most active translator and organising team member pleaded to:

> **Keep our entries short**
>
> Since we are trying to translate everything, we should try to keep our posting reasonably short so that translators will not give up. (EW, 2003)

Indeed, if we look at the number of threads and messages posted in the main café discussion area, and if we assume that discussion, dialogic or design conversations would tend to generate a greater number of postings in any one thread rather than many single postings, we can get an impression of the types of conversations that might have taken place. Therefore, if we categorise the café conversation threads under the headings of: single posting, posting plus comment, posting plus two or three comments, posting plus more than three follow-up postings, these are the type of conversations that took place:

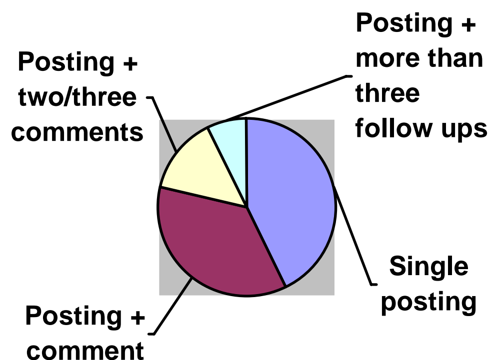

Figure 3. Indication of the types of conversations in the international café

In other words, just under 80% of the conversations were either single posting or single posting plus comment. While a closer analysis of the content of the messages, as well as a comparison with the pattern of conversations in both the main workshop and other similar types of online workshops would be helpful in interpreting these figures, this record does not suggest that translations in the café actually encouraged international community building (dialogue) or design conversations. In fact one of the most active participants in the café summed up his involvement as:

I was involved, but had the feeling that I was sending messages in a bottle. (MD, 2003)

It is interesting to note that those threads where discussion or dialogue did take place were entitled "Language", "El mismo idioma, differente culturas2" and "El traductor3" all of which explored the nuances of language, culture and translating.

To summarise, we need to be clear about the purpose and intent of the conversations when considering the usefulness of translations. Translations, which are very demanding, may be more helpful in dialectic conversations and possibly (although by no means certainly) in discussion. However, as discussion conversations are not for finding solutions or constructing new knowledge we may want to move the conversations further in our international café. Dialogue, or community building, conversation which focuses on constructing meaning through sharing perspectives, but which does not have a goal or an intended outcome, may be an appropriate type of conversation to aim for (given the metaphor of a café) but for which translation would be unhelpful. Design conversations are arguably ambitious given the time people have to participate in the café and the amount of work required in the main workshop. However, given that design conversations are goal related and focus on creating something new, they may also be seen to suit the purpose of a certain type of café. For example, we can imagine the Parisian café in the 60's that provided a location for intellectuals to be active in the philosophical and political debates of that time, and the Portuguese *Tertúlia* before the revolution in 1974, where café-talk ranged from exploring the artistic and cultural to articulating and planning underground, political ideas.

It might be helpful at this stage to ground these reflections about types of conversation in the light of a suggestion made by one of the organising team members:

Suggestion:

(…) make a language learning space for instance – build a dictionary or glossary of CoP terms in multiple languages. (BS, 2003)

With this suggestion it is possible to imagine participants with different first languages jointly building a dictionary or glossary (or a *distinctionary*) of CoP terms in different languages, with their roles and relationships being those of co-explorers of multi-languages, involved in design conversations that lead both to negotiating meanings and discovering what words signify in each other's socio-cultural contexts. In validating this paper, a participant gave an example of how

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[2] The same language, different cultures

[3] The translator

[4] See the work of Work Frontiers International: http://www.workfrontiers.com/distinctionary.html

this might work. He referred to the word community, which might well be translated technically into Spanish as “comunidade”:

> In Argentina, people talk about “comunidades” as synonymous of neighbourhoods, mostly poor neighbourhoods, while “la red” is something very similar to a CoP within the neighbourhood that does something specific, such as support children in learning reading and writing, collaborate in the neighbourhood free dining facilities, etc. It also makes me thing about specific and local cases. (PN, 2003)

Going back to social semiotics, what people would be learning through texturing, i.e. in and through their conversation about CoP terms in multiple languages, would lead to new ways of seeing, acting, relating, being and intervening. Laudable objectives for an international café of explorers!

Prioritising time

Such laudable objectives are all very well, but they involve a significant investment of time. Time, or lack of time, was a thread running through almost all reflections about the café from both participants and café organisers. Not only was the act of translating a lengthy business, with translators all reflecting similarly that what surprised them about the café experience was “*how time consuming it was to translate*” (MD, 2003), but also time was a general issue that arose about participation in the café but which were also reflected in comments about the workshop. These feelings are illustrated both in comments like “*if I had had more time*” (MR) and “*I didn’t have time to participate as much as I’d like to*” (XX) to the fact that around two thirds of workshop participants did not post anything at all in the café. Moreover any change in the design of the space, the objectives or the activities of the café would require more time: time for designing and setting up the space; time for facilitating; and time for participants to engage in and reflect on meaningful conversations. Hence this issue of time and translation cannot be disentangled from any aspect of an international café and clearly the price levied in terms of time in an international café is one that has to marry with the cafés objectives and its role in the CoP workshop.

Multiliteracies: a proposal

If the answer for the international café is not “simultaneous” translation from and to participants’ first language, then where do we go from here?

A suggestion would be to move in the direction of explicitly valuing, encouraging and reflecting on **global literacies**. In simple terms, global literacy is “a state of seeing, thinking, acting and mobilizing in culturally mindful ways” (Rosen, 2000:57).

However, it is particularly useful to look at global literacies as an aspect of multiliteracies defined by The New London Group in their article “A Pedagogy of Multiliteracies” first published by Harvard Education Press in 1996. Some of the theory behind multiliteracies could be extended to practical suggestions for the international café.

The multiliteracies argument begins with the premise that our personal, public and working lives are changing in dramatic ways, and these changes are transforming our culture and the ways we communicate. The term multiliteracies stresses two important and closely related changes:

(1) the growing significance of cultural and linguistic diversity and our daily task of negotiating differences both in our local communities and in our increasingly connected working and community lives;
(2) the influence of new technologies where meaning is made in increasingly multimodal ways. “To find our way around this emerging world of meaning requires a new, multimodal literacy” (ibid.)

Following from their presentation of the need to master multiliteracies, the New London Group introduces the notion of a pedagogy based on design where “(t)eachers and managers are seen as designers of learning processes and environments.” (2000:19) They propose a meta-language of meaning-making based on the concept of design in three phases:

(1) **The Designed**: accessing existing resources of available designs, or the available patterns and conventions of meaning (*situated practice*);
(2) **The Designing**: a process of shaping emergent meaning which involves re-presentation and recontextualisation (*critical framing*);
(3) **The Redesigned**: an outcome of designing something through which the meaning-maker(s) have remade themselves or a new meaning-making resource (*transformed practice*). (ibid.:20-23)

Returning to the suggestion put forward earlier by one of the organising team members, let us look at how a mulitliteracies approach could work in practice. The suggestion was to *build* a *dictionary or glossary* of *CoP terms* in *multiple languages*:

Multiliteracy phase	Suggestion	Multiliteracies approach
The Designed	"CoP terms"	Accessing existing CoP terms and concepts (in English)
The Redesigning	" … build …"	Finding local meanings for CoP terms, by describing and comparing what they mean in different languages and in local contexts.
The Redesigned	"… a dictionary or glossary… in multiple languages"	Production of a multimodal, multilingual glossary with an indication of what the terms mean in different local contexts.

Relating this suggestion to some of the concepts developed by Wenger (1998), we could regard the co-constructing of a glossary as participation and reification, where participation "refers to a process of taking part and also to the relations with others that reflect this process" (Wenger, 1998:55) and reification as "the process of giving form to our experience by producing objects that congeal this experience into 'thingness.'" (ibid: 58). The process of building a multi-contextual and multimodal glossary would resonate with Wenger's description of the negotiation of meaning which "involves the interaction of two constituent processes, which I will call participation and reification" (ibid:52) The glossary would not represent a simple product of translation, but rather a joint reflection on situated practices and contextualised meanings. As Wenger states: "the products of reification are not simply, concrete, material objects. Rather they are reflections of these practices, tokens of vast expanses of human meaning." (ibid: 61)

Discussion

There are three questions arising from this suggestion about a multilingual CoP glossary. The first question is in what language would conversations about it take place? The second is how, or in which modes, would the different languages/contexts be represented? And the third is to what extent is a café the location for carrying out even a minimally designed task?

(i) The question of language

First let us look at this question of language. A café participant reflected on the fact that the person in the workshop whose linguistic level of English was fairly weak insisted on writing his messages in English and translating them back into Spanish. He pointed out:

> If there are no national or language subgroups … for which talking in that language is a way of relating and negotiating a specific kind of knowledge that otherwise is not available, then there is little sense for someone to talk in their own language. (PN, 2003)

Another view came from a Dutch participant who, on first entering the café, was reluctant either to speak in Dutch or to translate her messages. She said that she was so accustomed to talking in communicating in English that she saw no reason to speak in Dutch.

An active participant/translator (whose first language is French) in the international café went even further:

> I would limit the concept of international café for highly specific domains of knowledge which are only cultivated by a relatively small community of highly educated people who prefer to write in some languages but can read a lot more. Make sure that the domain of knowledge addressed is very specific so that participants understand why the café is international. Do not spend time translating. Just provide a link to an online translator to help readers who are facing a tough challenge. (MD, 2003)

While screening access to the café may not be in the spirit of the workshop, this observation provokes some thoughts about global literacies. Taking a global literacy approach would explicitly value an individual's linguistic and cultural capital, particularly if it was multilingual and cross-cultural. English would be used as the international language, with task(s) that encouraged the use and discussion of words and concepts in different languages while at the same time being mindfully observant about how fellow participants were using and weaving between languages to participate in an international dialogic or design conversation. In the example of a multilingual glossary, participants speaking the same language or even languages of the same origin would probably discuss the meanings in context in their first language. A Spanish-speaking participant with a substantial amount of experience of working in international communities made a relevant comment in one of his suggestions for the café:

> I would attempt to present the discussion as separate, single language threads. So a Frenchman would see it running completely in French, a Spaniard in Spanish etc. Maybe a link could go back to the original in the original language, for those who can and want to check the original wording. It might end up having less of an International flavour, but be better at promoting participation. (BS, 2003)

Another related suggestion was made to “have a phone call – one for each language to discuss it” (JS, 2003) with “it” referring to the café but which could refer in this case to discussing both the task and the interactions. During this process monolinguists would be encouraged to develop strategies for observing, using and developing a greater repertoire of multiliteracies, particularly through observing the strategies of multilinguists.

Such a process was in fact hinted at by a monolingual participant in the café who expressed his surprise at how

> the focus on differences between languages turned itself in, to become a focus on the way I use my own language and on shades of meaning within the English tongue. (PR, 2003)

In short, the values behind a multiliteracy approach would reflect and extend the sentiment behind the café translation experiment in attempting to avoid the taken-for-granted assumptions of ‘rightness’ inherent in a monolingual and monocultural *Weltanschauung*. In other words:

> Unilingualism fits comfortably with, and gives credence to, ideas of naturalness and inevitability of worldview. These can be made vulnerable only through the study of other languages and the interruption of the naturalness to which each predisposes its users. As the largest signifying system and set of practices available to humans languages represent the embodiment of pluralist alternatives. (Bianco, 2000:100)

(ii) Representing the glossary

While this paper does not intend to explore multimodal ways of representing a multilingual glossary, it does put forward a suggestion by Nancy White[5] (personal communication) to reinforce the multimodal aspect of designing for multiliteracies. For presenting the final outcome, White proposes adding:

> a technological tool, that, when a person enters any of those terms in a post box, there is a function that allows the reader to access the translated, shared meaning terms (2003).

The original suggestion of building a dictionary or glossary of CoP terms has now been framed as a multiliterate project aiming to bring people together to explore and negotiate local contextualised meanings, which they will present in a multimodal form of reification.

Be that as it may, it now looks as though the relaxing sofa in the café has been turned into a busy work place, reminding us of the ongoing issues of time and of purpose and leading us to reflect in more depth about the purpose of the café.

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[5] Nancy White, Full Circle Associates, http://www.fullcirc.com/

(iii) Clarifying Purpose and Principles

While some organising team and participant reflections suggested that the café should have a clearer purpose and/or tasks, others liked the metaphor of the café and advised against detailed planning or active facilitation. Such a debate lends itself to clarifying the overall purpose and intention of having a café in the workshop. To what extent was the international café a comfortable (except perhaps for the translators) social add-on to the workshop? Or to what extent is the café a place for meaningful international and local learning synergies and transformation? What precisely does it mean to be "a link" between workshops? In the words of one of the organising team members:

> I think we need to give this café a more clearer place within/between the workshops. We have to think more about the purpose and what it could offer the participants … I think the name is not right … The thing is that the workshop itself can already be international. (MdL, 2003)

His thoughts were echoed in many participant reflections, such as this one:

> The launch and what we really wanted to achieve never was very clear in my mind. (MD, 2003)

This may also help account for the fact that very few participants from the Dutch workshop made any contribution to this café space that was specifically set up to be a link between them and participants of the main workshop. However, as pointed out by one of the organising team members this lack of participation in the café also raises a doubt about the role of translation as a *bridge* between workshops.

> My first thought on this is that their desire to speak in their native tongue was satisfied by the wholly Dutch workshop while those (non-native English speakers) in the English version might have needed this more. (BS, 2003)

Perhaps it would be helpful at this stage to contextualise this reflection on the international café as just one part of the process already underway of internationalising the workshop as a whole. Internationalising in this case refers both to recruiting participants from a wider international market and to opening the community network to people with different national perspectives and backgrounds. Jane Knight (1997), a leading writer of internationalisation in Higher Education may have some transferable insights here. She is very clear on the point of transformation of an organisation as a goal of internationalisation and talks of **integration** as a key:

> First, there is the integration of the international and/or intercultural perspective; Secondly, integration refers to the coordination of the various international activities to ensure that… there is a mutually beneficial relationship amongst initiatives… Finally, the international dimension needs to be integrated into the mission statement, policies, planning and quality review systems. (cited in Callan,1998:50)

From the business world, in an interview with Dee Hock, the founder of Visa International, we also hear about the importance of transformation. His vision of "transformation by design" does not refer specifically to either becoming international or to community building, but his words complement those of Jane Knight. In the interview, Hock states that:

> Your organization needs to be absolutely clear about purpose and principles and must be very careful to know what a purpose and a principle is – you know, a purpose is not an objective, it's not a mission statement – a purpose is an unambiguous expression of that which people jointly wish to become. And a principle is not a platitude – it is a fundamental belief about how you intend to conduct yourself in pursuit of that purpose. You have to get very precise about these things. http://ww.wie.org/j22/hockintro.asp

While the issue of translating into three other languages in the international café may have begun as an experiment in removing language barriers, perhaps it is also the beginning of a process of making explicit to all stakeholders the purpose and principles behind a truly international, online workshop on Communities of Practice.

Conclusion

This in depth reflection on a brief informal experience of international communication in an online community workshop has attempted to highlight a number of interrelated issues. These issues or threads could provide the weft and the warp of a design for an international online community environment where negotiation of meaning and meaning making between people with different situated practices from different cultural contexts represented by different first languages is acknowledged and valued. Running vertically would be considerations in designing for different types of online conversations and designing for multiliteracies, while running horizontally would be considerations relating to clarity and integration of the purpose and principles of international actions[6] as well as of the time required for design, facilitation and participation.

In reviewing these considerations one might pause to reflect if they only apply to communicating and negotiating meaning in multilingual environments or if

[6] Technological or practical considerations, such as the character set available in the software, or consideration of international time zones were not in the scope of the paper.

they are not also pertinent to unilingual ones. Indeed we are reminded of Bakhtin's claim that all communication is, in a sense, translation. (Brandist, 1985) Certainly, communication in an online learning environment is already a complex issue, with language (and the *Weltanschauungen* that language represents) serving to greatly multiply the levels of complexity in the dynamics of meaning-making and negotiation of meaning. As Nancy White points out, in the online environment

> we can often walk away thinking we share meaning but don't. Add language to that and you have a fine pot of stew. (personal communication, 2003)

As the number of international communities grows, in what is now frequently referred to as a global knowledge-based society, further research is required to identify the role of international online communities in exploring and negotiating meaning and for challenging the taken-for granted assumptions behind a unilingual *Weltanschauung*. A closer examination needs to be made of the processes at play in the critical framing of both local and international (situated) knowledge, their transformation into new local and international practice(s) and the roles of languages, communities and technologies in these processes.

Acknowledgements

Many thanks to Marc Coenders, Maarten de Laat, Patricio Nelson, John Smith, Bronwyn Stuckey, Etienne Wenger and Nancy White whose support and collaboration helped shape the ideas and make the paper what it is. Thank you to café "clients" for their participation, feedback and validation: Martin Dugage, Patricio Nelson, Paul Robinson, Benjamin Sagalovsky, and those who are not quoted but who gave ideas for the future. Thank you to Barbie Irving for her final editing. For giving me her time to listen, encourage and make suggestions, deep thanks to Sally Mavor.

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