TECHNOLOGY IN PROFESSIONAL TRAINING AT MGIMO (UNIVERSITY)

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Abstract: Future specialists in different fields are supposed to acquire professional skills much more advanced than before. That is why international cooperation is becoming part and parcel of professional training at MGIMO. Skype, PP presentations, YouTube, VoiceThread, MovieMaker, MultiMedia database are among the few tools most widely used at the University. However, there is always a need for a better and more appropriate technological tool for specialists in different fields. This report is about the experience and various problems, which ensue in the process - both in finding and handling the right tool for cooperation and in students' overcoming psychological uneasiness.

Introduction

A lot has been written and reported on the range of technologies used in education (1, 2, 3, 7, 12), which as often as not keep academia in awe by the pace they are advancing and challenges they generate for educationalists in the 21-century. EdMedia conferences and alike help professors and teachers round the world get informed of the latest digital tools, experiments and achievements to enhance teaching-learning process, and turn it into a more efficient and fascinating endeavor for both professors and students.

Nowadays it is insufficient to speak about new methods of learning only within the framework of the university, as it would certainly not draw a complete picture of our technological evolution. Technologies are becoming more diverse and ubiquitous, and this most distinctive feature of today considerably blurs the borderline between institutional and independent out-of-class learning. Students use technologies everywhere and learning process has become an everyday-and-everywhere activity. On-line dictionaries and encyclopedias used for translation in class, at home and in transport, getting quick information from on-line newspapers and magazines using laptops, iphones, ipads, and mobile phones considerably speed up the process of deriving information and make it easily available. YouTube and Ted.com, Facebook, InContact are among a few often resorted to in order to get life-based examples in this or that field, for chatting or for listening practices. These are among the most popular web sites and tools for mobile social and educational communication that take on special significance, especially for journalists who are supposed to always keep abreast of the news and stay in touch with people. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the above-mentioned resources have become “signs” of the modernity. They do not surprise us any longer; they are taken for granted nowadays.

Technologies in different fields of study

MGIMO (U) is the institution where international journalists, diplomats, lawyers and economists, as well as specialists in many other fields are trained for careers both at home and international levels. As one of the leading universities in Russia, by default our institution is supposed to be in the vanguard of technological innovations. It’s not surprising, therefore, that technologies are part and parcel of teaching-learning process serving different purposes in different fields of study.

In our university the use of technologies depends largely on specialization and the goals set for the students of a particular field. Students of international relations school gain practice in diplomacy largely by participating in discussions of the most problematic political issues with politicians and representatives of international organizations via videoconferences, teleconferences and recorded audio or video messages, in other words, both synchronously and asynchronously. Such conferences are thoroughly prepared in advance, speakers are contacted and scenarios of discussion are outlined. Thus, a well-organised preparatory work is a prerequisite of a successful course and outcome of a teledebate or telediscussion. Interestingly, the survey of literature on digital educational platforms in education (7, 8, 5) has shown that these digital tools are most widely used in training future diplomats and politicians in other universities around the world.
In the school of international journalism where journalists, sociologists and PR specialists are trained, the most frequently used tools for mastering English (as the second or the third language) and improving listening skills, as well as exchanging ideas and thoughts on professional issues, are news channels of the English speaking countries (Great Britain and the USA), Yahoo! Groups, GoogleDrive, YouTube video materials, and Ted.com.

Listening is a separate aspect of the English teaching process, and it is paid special attention to. However, listening classes are not limited to special programs and tests for listening based on audio and video recordings, TV channels and Ted.com programs. It should be noted that our students have very good opportunities for travelling and obtaining first-hand experience in listening and practical speaking skills out of class live communication, which considerably facilitates the learning process, on the one hand, and pushes professors to keep pace with students’ advances, on the other. It is a mutual teaching-learning development, which fosters educationalists to improve programs for students and qualification programs for professors in order to create more challenges for the students and stimulate their interest and motivation in the studying process.

Learning programs, platforms and tools (PP presentations, Slidesharing and GoogleDrive, YouTube) are used both in class and out of class activities. If a decade ago video materials were incorporated into class work and allocated a certain time span, nowadays they are more often assigned for home watching or listening that can be accounted for by a more compressed and intensive workplan in class, often focused on active learning, with students’ participation in it.

Some professors of the English department successfully use such programs as memrise.com, rewordify.com and quizlet. Memrise.com is a learning tool, which helps create on-line active vocabulary at different levels of English study, on the basis of textbooks. Students can easily access the program in order to learn the assigned active vocabulary and test the results of memorization on-line. Students are often invited to participate in this work and they successfully supply words with illustrations, photo or video materials thus turning the active vocabulary into a well-developed tree. This work is done willingly and students are encouraged by an extra credit in English.

Quizlet is another online learning tool mostly used for generating flashcards and quizzes. It is really user-friendly, convenient and available on the tablet or smartphone. The website Rewordify.com is used to teach students to read efficiently, understand difficult English texts faster, and learn words through paraphrasing. They can paste an English text and click the yellow button. Smart Highlighting identifies difficult words and professors may choose any level of sophistication for highlighted words. Our colleagues compose a list of new words and phrases with any provided option (vocabulary lists, learning activities, quizzes, flash cards) to practice in class. The program replaces the highlighted vocabulary and for better understanding shows an easier version. Then students complicate the text with the list of words they’ve practiced. The website also provides professors with the answer keys—from any block of the entered text. There are no expenses to bear and it works on any computer, tablet, or smartphone. For the future international journalists it is vital to be able to work with the text fast and efficiently. This web service is especially helpful in the class of 'Reading and translating periodicals'. But there are some limitations of the program: the text must be properly selected, there is no manual highlighting and it is impossible to add any extra words.

In order to avoid the routine of keeping handwritten journals for class administration, some professors resort to TeacherKit which they find a simple, easy-to-use, and feature-rich service. It helps organize classes and manage students easily. It significantly simplifies the complicated rating system and keeps it as long as required. But the application works only on Apple platforms or Windows 8. Mobile and online services save time and eliminate the distance between countries and provide us with international interactive classroom. As practice shows, the simplest tools are the most reliable.

**Videoconferences**

Telecommunication and videocommunication still remain the priority with the authors of the article. Nothing reveals students’ knowledge and skills better than their synchronous communication with counterparts and colleagues. It has already been emphasized in different articles and presentations (9, 11) that videocommunication actively engages all students into learning process and allows them to exchange and negotiate their thoughts and ideas on various professional, social, political and other issues. Besides, it also gives them a model of cooperation both within their own and international groups (10). Videocommunication teaches students on the both sides to be responsible for their preparation for and contribution to the communication process. It gives them an unforgettable experience in learning about a different culture, the mentality and mindset of people, it gives students an invaluable insight into a different but in most respects similar world of human life and a desire to learn more after the conference. In this respect video- or telecommunication can be viewed as a valuable model of learning how to be global and how to operate on a global level at large.

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Videoconferences have become an essential and most significant part of teaching-learning process in the school of international journalism. Every academic year we search for a counterpart in the same or close field of study to open discussions on professional, cultural or other issues, selected and coordinated by the both sides. As one student once remarked, ‘natural linguistic milieu, collaboration with English speaking students make our study of English meaningful, natural and purposeful’, with which one can hardly disagree.

**About the experiment**

During the academic year of 2013/2014 we looked at our collaboration via the Skype videoconference with Japanese students from Sapporo through a different perspective. The preparatory talks with the professor of English from Japan Cynthia Edwards were valuable introductions into Japanese culture, those cultural characteristics of Japanese behaviour, attitudes and stereotypes that have historical underpinnings and may, if unknown, stand in the way of successful and efficient collaboration. These talks shed light on a lot of unexplainable phenomena – a lot of whys which usually appear in the process of communication. The preliminary introductions into Japanese culture first on professors’ level and then on a professor – students level can facilitate students’ adaptation to collaboration on the international level. Getting some general knowledge about their counterparts, students of the both sides are tuned into communication and, though still constrained, feel ready to collaborate with their international peer group. Random acquaintances via Skype during the preparatory talk on professors’ level; preparations for videoconferences create auspicious conditions for starting a conversation about themselves and the institutions.

It’s not something new to point out uneasiness and shyness students demonstrate during videoconferences. Even Russian students, very active, unabashed and sharp-witted are often found stricken by fear or uncertainty. Practice makes perfect. The more they meet and talk, the better they feel in any situation. Our videoconference was not sufficient to learn about each other, and it was followed by further collaboration via Power Point presentations. The theme selected during our discussions was on national food. The Japanese students prepared four PowerPoint presentations on dishes and eating utensils, Japanese boxed-lunch – Bento, street food and home remedies. Russian students were supposed to give their comments and compare Japanese food with the Russian cuisine. These presentations opened a different world of Japanese culture – a world of colours, tastes and traditions so different from Russian ones, which helped see their character more vividly than any live videoconference. These presentations received comments from the Russian side and inferences on cultural differences and similarities were made, which was beneficial for the both sides and facilitated understanding and learning more about each other. The experiment revealed that videoconference might not be the only most efficient way of communication; it also revealed that students can express themselves and their culture better in colors, music, drawings and pictures, i.e. in visual rather than verbal forms, and it should also be taken into account.

Another joint activity was the asynchronous collaboration with a Canadian group of high school students from Vancouver, who made a film on the environmental issues and kindly shared it with the students of international journalism school, who at that time were discussing the theme ‘How to Save Our Planet’. The most burning questions of air and water pollution, rare animals and birds extinction and the dangers of landfills and pits came to the fore. The film was helpful but at the same time it revealed one serious problem, which we have been encountering all the years of our international collaboration – finding an equal partnership in terms of professional interests, language skills and an overall educational level of counterparts.

**Results and Conclusions**

The results of the international collaboration both on professors’ and students’ level could be summed up in the following way:

1. Video- and telecommunication is a powerful means of synchronous communication, which is required to be symmetrical, i.e. participants should be equal partners.

2. On these conditions video- and telecommunication creates a natural milieu for students to improve their language, professional, social and public speaking skills.

3. It considerably broadens students’ horizons.

4. In case of asymmetrical collaboration there may be other ways of communication – Power Point presentations proved to be a good compensatory tool in case students do not share the same language code and level of skills.
5. International collaboration is really versatile and multifaceted; if one communication tool proves to be inefficient there are many other tools at the disposal of a professor.

6. Students are conductors of technological innovations, they dictate the pace and quality of our technology-based evolution. The use of phones and ipads instead of paper and books, digital pictures of handouts indicate a digital breakthrough even in storing studying materials.

7. It’s obvious that with the advance of new technologies we are confronting a new dilemma - how to keep up with the ever increasing pace of technological revolution and take maximum advantage of its benefits, on the one hand, and maintain humane nature of a man that gets more and more endangered nowadays, on the other.

References


