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# Devising new kinds of communication skills: The European project CoMoViWo

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**Abstract**

This article presents CoMoViWo, an ongoing European project that aims at modernizing education at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), vocational institutions and enterprises in order to meet the needs of virtual and mobile work. The innovative character of this project is embedded in the combination of mobile and virtual communication, new technologies, multiculturalism and collaboration of and with enterprises. The difference phases of the project will undertake a review on communication literacy, the design of the virtual training modules, their piloting and their revision. The project results and outcomes will benefit the various actors dealing with virtual and mobile communication in multicultural environments and will also contribute to improve the employability needs of students and the success of enterprises in the global market.

## 1. Introduction: CoMoViWo

Currently, people spend an enormous amount of time at work using new ways of communication (Lonnblad, & Vartiainen, 2012). In working life we use mobile and virtual communication for networking, selling services, learning, and innovation (Waldeck et al., 2012). However, until recently, academics have paid little attention to this important social context (Holmes & Stubbe, 2003). To fill in this research gap, CoMoViWo, (Communication in Mobile and Virtual work), is a project that will examine workplace communication with funding provided by The

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Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency (EACEA) within the new Erasmus+ Programme for the period 2014-2017. Since 2006, The EACEA has been the European Union Agency responsible for the management of certain parts of EU's funding programmes in the fields of education, culture, audiovisual, sport, citizenship and volunteering. CoMoViWo's main goal will correspond to one of the agency's missions: the Contribution to European Knowledge and Expertise (https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/about-eacea_en).

CoMoViWo's contribution to European Knowledge and Expertise will be centred on the new language and communication practices in the context of virtual/mobile work, since the new Information Age has provided a challenging arena for language learning. With regard to this, Lam et al. (2013) contend that the new workplace has become increasingly volatile, intercultural and multilingual. The highest ranked skills demanded on managers and employees, when entering working life, are applied skills, i.e., new communication and language skills as well as digital and multicultural skills. And what is more, these skills need to be constantly updated. Hence, in this globalized work "the importance of effective workplace communication cannot be overstated" (Lam et al., 2013: 68).

To this end, the institutions involved in the project will see to the needs of employers and employees communicating in virtual/mobile settings, working closely with associated partners as a novelty. Furthermore, following Kearney et al. (2012), the project will try to make the staff and also the students in educational organizations aware of the pedagogical implementation of mobile technology. Thus, the main aim of the project that will entail some kind of innovative contribution will consist in introducing common training modules for degree students at Higher Educational Institutions (HEIs) and representatives in enterprises. The training modules will be created in close cooperation with the working life. The authors' view in this project is based on sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). This theory will play an important role in developing communication skills needed in mobile and virtual work.

## 2. Participants

CoMoViWo is coordinated by Turun Ammattikorkeakoulu Oy (in English, Turku University of Applied Sciences, TUAS). The project integrates as partners the following organizations which have brought to the project their expertise and specialised backgrounds in the areas relevant for the study:

- International Certificate Conference e.V. (ICC) (Germany)
- The Manchester Metropolitan University (UK)
- Politechnika Gdansk (Poland)
- Turun Ammattikorkeakoulu Oy (Finland)
- Universitat Politecnica de Valencia (Spain)

These institutions combine the expertise of four European HEIs and profit from the mastery in the field of quality assurance and dissemination provided by ICC. Their expert knowledge and skills cover, therefore, the strategic areas of the proposal. Furthermore, they have interest and experience in developing e-learning and have close connections with local and regional enterprises**.** Interestingly, the participation in lifelong learning education of the partners will be valuable during the project, as they also offer post graduate studies.

## 3. Methodology

The project consists of different stages aiming at the elaboration of learning modules carried out in close cooperation with associated partners. Planning a learning module requires forethought according to Chan and Robbins (2006); therefore, to improve the learning effectiveness the methodology involved needs to be carefully designed. In CoMoViWo, these are the steps devised in chronological order:

- A description of the communication literacy needed in virtual and mobile work in a multilingual and multicultural environment through a literature review;

- The design and administration of new surveys to find out the virtual communication needs in professional settings;
- The implementation of virtual communication training modules in curricula, and implementing these skills virtually in authentic environments;
- The definition of what communication literacy teachers need to be able to prepare students for working in virtual/mobile environments;
- The suggestion of forms of sustainable collaboration between working life and education.

Broadly speaking, this methodology has been proposed in order to analyse and then provide the means to satisfy communication needs of workplace language in virtual settings. The project will benefit from the collaboration of and with enterprises: each institution participating in CoMoViWo has two companies as associated partners, i.e., its working life partners. These are, mainly, enterprises that operate at different levels, locally, nationally and internationally, from both public and private sectors. These companies will contribute to the different phases of the project by playing different roles, as will be explained below. The enterprises will pilot the virtual communication modules, participate in interviews, and have a specific role in the dissemination and exploitation of the project. The collaboration of companies in the project is vital, especially in some of the phases since the focus on language learning for the workplace is now moving away from what Cowling (2007) calls "outsiders' views", like teachers and applied linguists who focus on the notions and functions supposedly required to satisfy various occupational language, to "insiders' views such as experts of their domain who therefore have expert insider knowledge, for example, company employees in the target language situation" (Cowling, 2007: 428).

## 4. Phases

The methodology of CoMoViWo will be implemented in different phases as shown below. Phases 4.1 and 4.2 have already been completed. The planning, design and evaluation of the learning tools carried out in these four phases require considerable time and effort, as suggested by Chan & Robbins, 2006.

### 4.1. Review of communication literacy

This initial phase makes a comprehensive overview and review of virtual and mobile work communication in a multicultural environment. The impacts of the changes on communication literacy in working life are described as a result of the omnipresence of social media, differences in understanding cultures and the increase of working in virtual teams. The goal is to identify both mobile and virtual communication in the current global market and virtual communication training. In this phase each partner discusses its own review and overview of the literature.

### 4.2. Needs analysis: A survey of current practices in virtual communication

The aim of this second phase is to get feedback from current practices in virtual communication based on the project's national and international working life cooperation and research overview. Following Cowling (2007), a questionnaire is devised in order to find out current demands in workplace communication. The questionnaire centres on the current workforce and hopes to identify areas that match the needs of managers and employees. A multiple choice survey is used. The purpose of this survey is to seek information on the virtual communication platforms used for business interactions and the communicative skills required by companies when a language other than the users' native language is used.

Intercultural communication at work is another focus of research. After a filtering and validation process, the questionnaire is administered to the companies collaborating with the project. This collaboration offers a new perspective from a source that has experience in the target situation. The informants, known as "domain experts" (Cowling, 2007), can provide quality information about the requirements of the workforce and the need of workplace language.

*4.3. Creating the virtual training modules*

The aim of this activity is to produce content, methods, tools and instructions for the virtual training modules in English and Spanish. The work consists in the creation of the modules in teacher teams working collaboratively in the partners' institutions and communicating by using social media. The modules will include guidelines for the teacher as well as tasks, content and assessment criteria. Then, working life experts and students will test and provide feedback on the materials. An important step of the process involves cross evaluation by teacher teams.

During the planning of the content and methods, each team will have an inside evaluation, i.e., cross evaluation. In order to activate the teachers also in face-to-face situations when possible, the two teachers representing the same institution will always be in the same team. To provide complementary feedback, selected working life experts will meet the teachers of their country face to face four times during the production stage.

The communication training modules will be based on collaborative learning. The content and methods of the modules will be decided based on the research overview, survey and piloting feedback as well as collaboration with working life experts. The modules will then combine authentic working life communication situations with communication tools and will be offered both for degree students and for enterprises as continuing training. An important fact to highlight is that the virtual training modules devised are easy to edit and adapt to meet the needs of prospective users.

*4.4. Piloting the virtual training modules*

Once the modules are created, they need to be tested and piloted with continuous feedback from the intended audience, according to Chan and Robbins (2006). In detail, the piloting phase includes:

- Planning;
- Piloting;
- Assessment;
- Presenting the results.

Thus, in this phase, the piloting of the created communication training modules will be performed in joint groups of working life representatives, teachers and students from the participating countries in order to gain an understanding of their feasibility as well as feedback from all user groups. The enterprise representatives will be both managers and employees and at least two nationalities will be represented. These heterogeneous groups are built to create an authentic situation of virtual and mobile work.

The piloting can take place under degree studies such as English/Spanish language, management, communication or cultural studies depending on the partner's needs and expertise. The assessment of the piloting will be carried out according to the criteria described previously.

In the next phase, the modules will be edited according to the assessment results.

*4.5. Revision of the virtual training modules*

There are several activities in this phase that involve, first, updating the learning modules according to the results of the piloting, and followed by assessment based on the feedback of teachers, students and working life representatives. Then, the results will be presented to the participants in reports.

Consequently, the final modules will be based on the research overview and surveys conducted earlier, on the piloting experience and feedback as well as cross-evaluation. After the revision process, the final modules will be published as Open Educational Resources accessible through the project website and Wiki.

## 5. Sustainable collaboration between HEIs and enterprises

The following platforms will be used by CoMoViWo for a sustainable collaboration between working life, enterprises and education:

- Virtual community in LinkedIn for sharing expertise and creating new knowledge;
- A Wiki for the best practices and experiences;
- Working life experts mentoring, supporting teachers in this project;
- Participants in the piloting: working life representatives and students;
- Participants in the workshops and meetings virtually or face to face.

Furthermore, based on experiences during the project, best practices will be published in the Wiki. They will also be included in the Teacher's Handbook. With the help of this sustainable collaboration aimed for both educational institutions and enterprises, the HEIs can ensure that their education and training meet the ever changing needs of working life. The description facilitates implementing authentic methods and contents in teaching and training also in the future.

## 6. Implications of CoMoViWo

The joint collaboration in CoMoViWo of enterprises, HEIs educators, and students is expected to produce positive results with regard to the quality of the modules created, which can enhance the successful performance of virtual/mobile communication in labour market environments. In an academic institution, the material created is expected to become a benchmark for educators with future application in the teaching and assessment of employability skills in an attempt to address the changing demands of a globalised labour market and ensure that tomorrow's workforce is endowed with successful communication skills. The results of the project will be disseminated in international conferences and international journals.

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