

Capstone Project for Graduate Students in Editing Class

Doing a project that connects with real situations and real people appeals to me as the best way to teach students what to expect when they edit for companies whose branches extend globally. Such a project also personalizes the experience and gives insight into some of the difficulties language presents when literal translations occur.

I contacted Condux International, Inc. (Condux) and asked Mr. Dale Bjorkland, Operations Manager for Manufacturing, if he would visit with my students, explain his company's connection with Tesmec in Italy, and allow us to practice editing a manual for him. Since I had worked for Mr. Bjorkland *Americanizing* manuals that Italians had translated from their language into English, I knew the difficulties my students would face. Literal translations do not do justice to the meanings behind words, and the best way to understand that concept seemed to have the students experience the difficulties first-hand.

Mr. Bjorkland and two engineers met with five graduate students and me at the Condux plant in Mankato. They explained their connection with Tesmec in Italy and their role in marketing *pullers* and *tensioners* for high voltage and telecommunication lines. Since much of the machinery had origins in Italy, the Italians wrote the manuals. Because few Americans understand that language, people at Tesmec provided translations for their American counterparts. That led to my job: make the manuals understandable to Americans in the field who have run the machinery that installs the cable used to pull and tensions the voltage and telecommunication lines.

I had also updated charts and made certain that metric conversions were accurate, since Condux does business with Canadian enterprises. I asked my students to do the same, but I asked them to consider the cosmetic aspect of the document they would edit. Presentation—presentation—presentation!

After meeting with Mr. Bjorkland, the graduate students researched other markets Condux has. Those markets included Canada, China, and South America. They also researched Italy, the home of Tesmec. I wanted the students to consider translation difficulties Condux might expect when translating their own manuals for their own global clients.

On March 31, 2005, Mr. Bjorkland sent us a manual to edit (just for practice... we had the document as received from Italy). The students read the manual and complained that they did not understand what they had read. However, one resourceful student opened her thesaurus and started deducing the meanings that lay behind the obscure words on the pages before her. Sometimes the hardest questions have the easiest solutions.

My students came alive! Until they received the manuals, they paid lip-service to the project and the busy work I had assigned. Finally, though, they had an actual document they could edit. Since they had read the document, they assumed they should know and understand the task before them. However, they had no idea what they had read. They

may as well have read from another language, which, in essence, they had done. When they compared the work they had done independently, they admitted they had only guessed at meanings and had made very little progress. However, when they gathered as a group to edit, talk, explain, question, and realize meanings behind the literal translations they had before them, they started to understand the concept behind the assignment.

Perhaps *safety-in-numbers* helped, but their confidence grew not only in the group, but as individual editors. I stared in amazement as confused and stumbling students metamorphosed before my eyes into the editors I wanted them to become. When they could not decipher meanings, they made queries to Condux that demonstrated thought and deliberation.

For tools and assessments, I led them to an online document called *Levels of Edit*. I also uploaded documents on listening, common editing problems, and editing for a client. They also wrote about their research, and we discussed (tentatively) the edit I expected (hoped at that point) they would be allowed to do for Condux. Since Condux had been in the middle of an ISO audit, we did not receive the manual until March 31, 2005, well into our semester. Additionally, we reviewed the information from our visit to Condux. I encouraged the students to create style sheets for their edit. Through discussion with the students, I hoped they had an understanding of the project, but until they actually started working on the edit together, we had no “Aha!” moments.

As of April 15, 2005, the graduate students continue with their edit. They did not know at first if they would complete the 19-20 pages in the manual, but they now seem to thrive on the challenge. My best guess is that they will not only complete the edit, bring the manual into parallel construction, and accomplish the cosmetic changes that comprehensive editing entails, but that they will also have designed a better and stronger document for Condux. We will give Mr. Bjorkland a copy of the changed manual so he can see what we did. I expect the project to end May 2, 2005.

Finally, the students will share their experience with their classmates, the undergraduate students taking the editing course. They will also write an article for publication on their experiences with the project, analyzing the difficulties, successes, frustrations, exasperations, expectations, disappointments, and what they might have wanted to do differently.

I look forward to the conclusion of the project. I feel successful because I created editors who have a passion for what they do. I set a task before them, and they responded first with confusion and then with enthusiasm as the project took form. I witnessed their individual and collective “Aha!” moments. I am so proud of them!