Blended Learning in Complex Environments:

Reaching Learners in the Field

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Abstract

This paper describes a project designed to improve multilingual humanitarian communication in the field through training non-professional field interpreters in a blended learning environment. Following on Moser-Mercer & Bali (2007) who reported on the results of a needs analysis for training humanitarian field interpreters in conflict zones, this paper discusses design and development of both virtual and blended approaches, overcoming connectivity problems, collaborative learning and contextualization of learning activities in some of the most challenging and complex environments (Sudan, Afghanistan, and refugee camps in Kenya). We conclude that a careful blend of sound pedagogy and reliable technology, ownership of the learning enterprise, and responsiveness to local infrastructure limitations are critical elements in enabling skill and knowledge acquisition in the field.

1. Introduction

Conflict resolution and conflict transformation imply that deep-rooted sources of conflict are addressed and transformed. This suggests putting an end to the pursuit of incompatible goals by different groups or actors, whether this pursuit involved armed and violent conflict or remained at the level of a latent political conflict, with most major armed conflicts today being hybrid struggles that spill across the international, state and societal levels. All conflict resolution and subsequent transformation requires negotiation and the ability of suppressed or marginalized individuals or groups to articulate their interests; it requires challenging existing norms and power structures with a view not only to resolve the conflict, but to ensure that through peace-making, peace-keeping and peace-building future conflicts are being prevented (Ramsbotham, Woodhouse & Miall, 2011).

Challenging and ultimately changing attitudes through mediation and negotiation in order to effect changes in existing relationships and establishing a balance of power requires parties to communicate social values and norms, cultural and political beliefs and to overcome deep-seated mistrust. In most if not all conflicts the parties do not speak the same language, nor share the same culture. When third parties become involved in arbitration and mediation they bring with them yet another language and culture and usually impose it as the language of negotiation, obliging all parties to

either speak that language, usually English, or rely on interpreters to support the communication process.

As conflict resolution efforts are deployed at a higher level, there is usually a humanitarian crisis to contend with on the ground, with access to geographical regions to be negotiated by organizations trying to assist the local population by supplying food, water and sanitation. Most humanitarian organizations do not have immediate access to language staff that could assist them capably in negotiating access and supporting refugees and internally displaced persons. In complex emergencies, with military operations being carried out while natural disasters and/or famine ravage a region, communication needs are exceedingly difficult to meet.

Prudent use of limited funds dictates priorities and in zones of humanitarian disaster and conflict the list of priorities is long, with language and cultural needs usually relegated to last place. Study after study recognizes the need for humanitarian action to engage with locals in order to build the trust that is essential for long-term solutions. As the humanitarian enterprise becomes more and more institutionalized, with targets to meet, internal procedures to respect and at times highly political agendas to pursue, its ability to engage on the ground beyond providing immediate, front-line relief is jeopardized (Donini, 2012). The prevailing English-only approach reinforces the image of humanitarian actors being subservient to their organization's mission and short-term goals, rather than in understanding the complexities of the local context and leveraging local resources to develop culturally-embedded and consequently more lasting solutions.

Multilingual and multi-cultural communication capacity in the field thus emerges as one of the most powerful ways to support peace-making, humanitarian action and conflict prevention. The approach to capacity-building must thus address the immediate and urgent needs of humanitarian assistance on the ground, as well as those of higher-level negotiations and ultimately transitional justice and development.

2. Virtual learning in complex environments

Over the past decade all major humanitarian organizations have embraced virtual learning in various ways in order to meet the training needs of their staff at headquarters and in the field. Engagement of local staff, however, has increased more significantly only in recent years, and local staff have thus not had automatic access to the learning resources deployed by the organizations on their own platforms. Depending on the contractual relationship between the local staff member and the organization (regular staff, temporary staff, incentive worker, etc.), local staff continue to face barriers when it comes to accessing learning resources, either because they are not considered regular staff, and thus not given access to the organization's intranet, or because the learning resources are available only in the working language of the organization (mostly English, in some cases English and French, or in English and Spanish), but not in one of the local languages, or because the learning content does not address their needs on the ground.

LINGOs (www.ngolearning.org), a not-for-profit consortium of over 75 international humanitarian relief, development, conservation and social justice organizations that share learning resources and experiences has served as a central contact point for private sector organizations that are interested in assisting the sector but want to see their contributions of software, courseware, systems and services be leveraged across many organizations. LINGOs operates a Learning Management System with courses on leadership and management development, IT, project

management, stress management for humanitarian workers, personal safety and others. LINGOs is able to provide free and/or subsidized access to a number of learning tools to enable organizations to develop, launch and maintain technology-assisted learning strategies. Member organizations thus save time and resources in putting learning content on-line and while they can share available content, the responsibility to meet specific needs on the ground remains with the aid agency.

Another training content provider is the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC; www.humanitarianinfo.org), a forum for coordination, policy development and decision-making involving the key UN and non-UN humanitarian partners. IASC was established in June 1992 in response to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 46/182 on the strengthening of humanitarian assistance. In December 2011 the IASC Principals endorsed the following five commitments for leaders of humanitarian organizations: 1) Demonstrate their commitment to accountability to affected populations; 2) Provide accessible and timely information to affected populations, so that they can make informed decisions and facilitate dialogue between an organization and its affected populations; 3) Offer feedback and complaint mechanisms; 4) Enable affected populations to play an active role in the decision-making processes that affect them; and 5) Involve affected populations in the design, delivery and evaluation of programs. Clearly, all of these commitments require humanitarian staff to communicate with the recipients of aid.

ELRHA (Enhancing Learning and Research in Humanitarian Assistance - www.elrha.org) has been addressing the professional development needs of individual humanitarian workers through consultation with over 2000 stakeholders around the globe. The ELRHA scoping study identified the major problems stopping the flow of trained people into the humanitarian sector and was received enthusiastically by the people it consulted on the issue of professionalization in the humanitarian sector. ELRHA focuses on building partnerships between institutions of higher education and the humanitarian sector with a view to matching the sector's needs with program offerings in higher education.

This short review of some of the major content and e-learning providers in the humanitarian sector illustrates that the focus is on preparing humanitarian leaders and workers for assignments in the field and on offering continuing staff development options for improving operations in the field. The emphasis is thus on transmitting knowledge that is applicable to a large spectrum of humanitarian contexts. Most, if not all of these learning resources are being accessed on organization-specific platforms whose connectivity requirements can usually only be met when working in medium to high bandwidth environments with uninterrupted internet service (headquarters, regional centers, or compounds in the field).

3. **Skill-building in complex environments – the case of interpreting**

When communicating with the local population humanitarian actors require the services of interpreters as they rarely speak the local language. Interpreting denotes the oral mode of transferring messages from one language to another, while translation refers to its written form. Interpreting can be done consecutively, either one sentence at a time or several sentences together with the interpreter taking notes to support memory, or simultaneously with the interpreter providing the rendition in a synchronous fashion within seconds of the original speech. The cognitive challenges of interpreting have been well documented and developing expertise requires consistent and deliberate practice with feedback to be provided by experienced

practitioners on a regular basis. Given the variety of ways in which people express themselves, the input to interpreting cannot be limited to a fixed number of sentences a trainee should learn to interpret, and skill-building thus requires trainee-trainer/tutor interaction.

Moser-Mercer & Bali (2007) and Kherbiche (2009) reported on the basic needs and challenges encountered by interpreters working for humanitarian organizations in the field. The results of these needs analyses fed into the development of two virtual training courses for ICRC interpreters working in Pakistan, Afghanistan, Uzbekistan, Sri Lanka and the Occupied Arab Territories. Course content and delivery modes were supported by InZone's VLE, a proprietary platform developed by the Interpreting Department at the University of Geneva which is built around the pedagogical concepts of socio-constructivist and problem-based learning (Class, Moser-Mercer & Seeber, 2004). The three learning modules that made up the basic course (Introduction to virtual learning in the field, Ethics in humanitarian interpreting, and Skill-building in consecutive interpreting) were vetted by ICRC prior to being launched. All content was duplicated on DVDs and delivered via diplomatic pouch as back-up for use in case of poor connectivity to ICRC field offices in the above-mentioned countries. The time allotted to completing the three modules had to be extended several times as the demands of the field made it difficult for interpreters to meet the various deadlines. Both courses were carefully evaluated using a multi-stakeholder approach with feedback received from learners, trainers, ICRC users and ICRC headquarters (Moser-Mercer & Class, 2010).

The outcome of this evaluation informed the design and development of a new basic course for humanitarian field interpreters working for UNHCR in Nairobi and Kakuma Refugee Camp in Kenya, and in Khartoum and the refugee camps in and around Kassala in Sudan. The major challenge identified in the above-mentioned evaluation was release time for interpreters to engage in virtual learning, as they were not attending a face-to-face course and thus continued to be on call for work. Technical challenges included unstable internet connections that obliged the course designers to script activities to last no longer than 20 minutes; difficulties for trainers to provide substantive feedback on interpreter's note-taking skills for consecutive interpreting which were subsequently solved by training interpreters to use their cell phones to take pictures of their notes and to upload JPEG images to the VLE for trainer feedback; and preparing sound recordings of about three minutes length and subsequent uploading of learners' interpretations which required the preparation of a short guide to using open source software for recording MP3 files and for uploading them into the VLE. Among the major advantages noted by ICRC participants was the ability to have regular access to expert trainers, and to share experiences and benefit from a peer network across conflict zones through the VLE platform and the encouragement of collaborative learning.

In adapting the basic course to new humanitarian settings the course developers paid particular attention to lessons learned: 1. Organizing content and designing exercises in a way that would require limited internet connection time (maximum 20 minutes per activity); 2. Repeating needs analyses when offering the basic course to new humanitarian organizations in order to ensure continued contextualization of all learning content to fit the organization-specific work environment; 3. Gathering detailed information from all course participants about individual internet connectivity and the devices available to them for learning (desktop, laptop, mobile phone); 4. Setting clear deadlines and enforcing them to keep all learners registered for a particular course on schedule and allow for more collaboration, which is vital for

skill-building and ownership of learning; and 5. Moving from an all-virtual approach to a blended format with trainers covering certain learning activities in the field in a face-to-face setting, and the balance of the modules being delivered on-line in the VLE.

The switch from an all-virtual to a blended mode presents a host of difficulties with regard to efficient delivery of learning in the field as trainers are required to deliver training under the protection of humanitarian organizations in conflict zones and must thus also be ready to contend with the vicissitudes of life in dangerous environments. However, the switch to blended learning even in complex environments has clearly motivated learners, allowed them to develop confidence and trust in their trainers, and has created the kind of personal relationship that is needed for critical feedback during skill acquisition to be properly assimilated. The learning cultures we encounter in conflict zones are decidedly traditional, relying on the authority of the trainer and the passivity of the learner. This is not conducive to skill acquisition as it deprives the learner of peer feedback, an essential ingredient to sustainability of training and learning in the field, once the trainer returns home and the virtual part of the course begins.

4. Improving humanitarian communication – one interpreter at a time

When training for such a specialized skill one would expect course designers and trainers to provide a highly individualized learning environment that closely matches the needs of the learners. This is all the more important as learners are given little release time for on-line learning, as trainers must operate both within the often serious constraints of conflict zones and in an on-line environment, where every five minutes of connectivity must be negotiated with the organization, or with other NGOs in conflict zones liable to provide computer access to learners: e.g. InZone has worked with the Don Bosco Foundation and Jesuit Refugee Services in Kakuma Refugee Camp to negotiate computer time for interpreters to upload their activities. This was vital to the success of the UNHCR course in Kakuma as 60 interpreters were registered to be trained on-site in the camp, of whom 34 continued on-line. However, due to security considerations interpreters are not allowed access to the organization's computers and InZone then donated two decommissioned laptop computers and bought mobile internet access from a Kenyan service provider for the duration of the course, installed the internet and trained the learners. For our recent course launch with UNAMA in Afghanistan it was necessary to negotiate the release of each page of our VLE by the IT department on-site so that learners could actually work in the VLE. As learners had come from all over Afghanistan to Kabul for the on-site part of the training course, it remained unclear as to whether those returning to the provinces would need to negotiate the release of internet pages upon their arrival in their home town. It is for this reason that we have used responsive design methodology to adapt our learning environment to the use on different mobile devices; the migration has just been completed and should provide a better learning environment to all those having to rely on mobile telephony for learning in the field. However, interpreting being a performance skill and the use and exchange of sound files being an integral part of learning, and mobile telephony in conflict zones being severely restricted for security reasons, responsive design technology does not hold the definitive technology solution for enabling smooth learning in the field.

It is fair to conclude that of the one hundred interpreters from different conflict zones in Kenya, Sudan and Afghanistan who are currently completing the basic

course in humanitarian field interpreting, no two present exactly the same technological and pedagogical challenge. We have access to a broad spectrum of technological fixes (Davis and Nyamapfene, 2010) to some of the greatest challenges facing the implementation of learning in conflict zones, and yet, no two conflict zones are exactly alike and ultimately successful learning can happen only through the designers' and trainers' acute attention to detail and constant supervision of both the technological and the pedagogical environment: trainers not only train skills but troubleshoot computer, internet and mobile telephony problems, negotiate internet access with NGOs in the field, and build a local support network prior to leaving the conflict zone.

5. Conclusions

The importance of quality multilingual communication in the field is what has motivated InZone to explore new and unconventional ways of delivering training in conflict zones. As our experience in different zones evolves, a pattern of successful course delivery emerges that requires course designers and trainers to work towards the following standards: 1. Needs vary, even within one and the same organization, and thus require renewed analysis; 2. Learning cultures in conflict zones are largely traditional, and what has become established pedagogical practice in the North and West cannot be immediately implemented in the South and East, but requires constant monitoring and adaptation for sustainability and ownership of learning to evolve; 3. Personal contact with learners in a face-to-face setting is vital to the success of the learning enterprise; although it carries major risks for trainers and learners alike, it is essential to building trust and confidence that are the bedrock of virtual learning; for complex cognitive skills that require regular feedback from trainers and tutors over an extended period of time blended learning is superior to one-off on-site-only learning; 4. There is no one technological solution that fits all learning in conflict zones, and even within one and the same zone personalized solutions must be negotiated, one learner at a time; building a reliable local support network that includes key staff in the organization as well as outside NGOs enables trainers to monitor the situation remotely after leaving the field; 5. Adaptability should be a key characteristic of trainers and tutors working with learners in conflict zones; resilience is essential to working with learners on-site and virtually in conflict zones where a constant flow of information from the field requires trainers to respond in a responsible and confidential manner and in keeping with humanitarian principles. Technology has opened new channels of communication that can transport trainers instantaneously into some of the most dangerous and war-ravaged environments, it has also managed to open the window of education to learners, but care is required to keep these channels open.

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