Preface

APPROACHING INTERCULTURAL RHETORIC/ABORDAR LA RETÓRICA INTERCULTURAL

This book is a culmination of almost 25 years experience teaching, researching, consulting, and living in intercultural contexts. The writing itself has taken almost three years, and as I write this preface as the last piece of the book (but the first thing the reader encounters), I find myself reflecting upon my bilingual and intercultural situation, and in many ways, wishing the readers could understand this situation better as a way to approach this book. Like many academics, I keep myself busy teaching, researching, and consulting, but this semester has been a bit different. As a “Profesor Asociado” at the Colegio de Chihuahua, a new graduate research university in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, I have been teaching a ten-week empirical research methods course to the first group of 19 doctoral students. Helping 19 doctoral students design their research methods for their dissertations has been invigoratingly challenging, to say the least. However, my feelings have been rather poignant at this juncture for two reasons. First, I have been working with El Colegio de Chihuahua and the Autonomous University of Ciudad Juárez for nearly eleven years, teaching a variety of methods and pedagogy courses. This cross-border experience has been combined with my four years living and teaching in Ecuador, both of which have greatly enriched and impacted my perspectives on intercultural communication, something that the reader will witness throughout this entire book. Much of this book combines lots of theory with relevant research, and my reflexive, concrete, and lived experience.

However, for the past two years (2009-2011), I have not been able to travel into Ciudad Juárez because of its extreme levels of narco violence, which has earned this city the dubious honor of being the most violent in the world. At the same time, El Paso, Texas, which is right across the border from Ciudad Juárez, had been earning recognition as being the safest city in the United States. Feeling grateful for my relative safety on the El Paso side of the border, but wanting to participate somehow in the reconstruction of Ciudad Juárez, I accepted the invitation to teach this methods class. In September 2011, I nervously crossed the border and traveled to El Colegio de Chihuahua. I was grateful to learn that the violence had really been subsiding to more “tolerable” levels, which I had noticed in the Juárez papers but was anxious to confirm. There, while I was reuniting with colleagues and friends whom I had not physically seen for two years, I noticed two things: that my friends look spent but the same time strong. Then my colleagues began to relate their stories of the narco violence in Juárez. All of them had either witnessed or heard a murder; all of them have known people who had been shot; most of them had been repeatedly extorted; and all of their children or family members know of innocent friends being killed. Many showed physical signs of the emotional, interpersonal, cultural, and social costs of the violence.
But all were totally committed to making Ciudad Juárez a better place to live and not caving into the desperation; they were also very angry and tired of their situation; and most of their dissertations and research address these issues. I felt an amazing strength in them that I will continue to admire and emulate. I am not relating these stories to sensationalize the violence, or awkwardly romanticize Ciudad Juárez, or somehow place this book in a more privileged context. It is simply my situation along the U.S.-Mexico border.

At the same time, however, I think it is illustrative to view this U.S.-Mexico border context as an important introduction or abordamiento to the intercultural rhetoric of this book. Although this book does not discuss narcotics trafficking, border law enforcement, and drug related issues (perhaps my next book), it does discuss the great complexities and roles of rhetoric and professional communication in intercultural, global, and border contexts. For example, one of the reasons that the violence in Ciudad Juárez has been subsiding is that Mexican law enforcement has improved their ability to find, arrest, and prosecute narco criminals. (Another reason is that one of the cartels, the Juárez Cartel, has actually won the drug-turf war). One of the main reasons for this improvement in law enforcement is that U.S. and Mexican law enforcement and other agencies have been able to see the narco violence as a cross-border, regional issue, requiring close collaboration in ways not previously carried out. In other words, it’s not just a Mexican or U.S. problem, but a joint problem, shared by two closely related countries. There have been significant amounts of cross-border collaboration, training, and intelligence sharing among Mexican and U.S. Federal, State, and local agencies, producing tangible results. It has been a successful example of intercultural communication and collaboration on this issue, not only in the ways the issues are framed, but how the work is carried out. Thus, in spite of all the angry rhetoric among politicians, law enforcement, academics, and community activists, a growing number of border residents are quietly finding ways to improve their communities, especially on the Mexican side. It is the quiet, often subtle, but highly effective intercultural work that I value and hope is exemplified in this book. As I mention frequently, the theory and approaches in this book do not have the fancy heat of most critical theory, but they are surprisingly effective in their reach and application.

This obvious example of the narco wars in Ciudad Juárez, however, has not been a life-changing event for me regarding intercultural inquiry; it is simply a demonstrative but poignant and current life experience that contextualizes me and this book. In my 25 years of intercultural experience, I have approached intercultural inquiry with the same need to balance the sophistication and complexity of intercultural rhetorical theories and methods with the need to make them work on the ground. And if making the theories and methods work better requires revising or even throwing out privileged and predominant approaches in rhetoric and professional communication, then so be it. Thus, achieving this balance is very important for developing theories and methods that are successful at explaining, researching, and intervening appropriately in intercultural rhetorical situations. In other words, praxis is critical to the approach to this book. For example, more than half of the book examines the concrete practices of intercultural rhetoric and professional communication, including policies and procedures documents, distance education course designs, and teaching intercultural and global writing.

Second, like the border situation, an important ramification for this praxis approach is situating ethics in the intercultural situation. As this book delineates, far too many academic theories of intercultural rhetoric and culture are developed by ivory-tower academics who have neither the courage to get meaningfully involved, nor the theories, methods, and experience to understand how they might work towards a more just and peaceful society. This is demonstrated rather strongly in one point of the book
when I describe the event of U.S. academics erecting pink crosses at New Mexico State University to protest the problems of female murder in Juárez. From the perspective of my Ciudad Juárez colleagues, it was very easy for U.S. academics to erect an abstract symbol by people who are safely away from the violence; it’s much more difficult to develop meaningful interventions in the political, judicial, police, and transportation agencies. Likewise, just as I was reading an article on the postmodern conceptions of ethics in our field on one day, and then the next day, while returning home after teaching the methods course at El Colegio de Chihuahua, I began discussing with my colleague about the nature of evil. This wonderful colleague is designing her dissertation to research the ways that Ciudad Juárez youth are reconfiguring and re-constructing symbols of violence. Although steeped in all the critical theories of myth, symbolism, postmodern culture, and violence, this colleague has no trouble delineating the nature and structure of evil in our border area, which cannot be reduced to a hermeneutical textual interpretation. Similarly, this book, following the work in human rights and intercultural relations, argues for the need to see the ethical dimensions of intercultural situations. In other words, like my cross-border experience, this book demonstrates a strong exigency for placing ethics in conjunction with tangible and workable approaches for intercultural inquiry. For example, Chapter Eight explicitly draws connections among legal traditions, ethics, and rhetoric, showing how the UN’s Declaration of Human Rights is a viable model for discussing intercultural rights, despite its 60-year age. It then extends this discussion to new communication technologies such as Google Earth.

Finally, one of the joys and frustrations about working across two languages and cultures is the desire to use a word in one language that does not have an equivalency in the other. In writing this preface, I am facing the problem with finding the English equivalent of the Spanish verb Abordar, which has two meanings: to board a plane/train and to begin addressing an issue. One of the most pleasurable parts of teaching the methods course in Ciudad Juárez is that most of the students have enough knowledge of English to aid in translations problems. I teach the course entirely in Spanish, but often, when I try to teach difficult concepts, I will use English words and syntax; then, together, we begin comparing and constructing the meanings in both English and Spanish. This rich bilingual approach is very effective in many ways. Outside this bilingual context, however, it is not as easy. Thus, I would love for my readers to approach the reading of this book using the Spanish abordar, that is, your reading is both an introduction to and ride with its theme, intercultural rhetoric and professional communication. It is my attempt to present intercultural inquiries, but it is fraught with problems of translation—translating my experience into something you can understand well. Often, I use binaries or oppositions to explain cultural differences and similarities, but these are meant to demonstrate predominant, bell-curve approaches, which become a translation problem for many steeped in derridian poststructuralism. However, if the reader can grant me the patience of my Ciudad Juárez students and try get beyond the cultural attributions that are presented in bell-curve opposition and focus on understanding this approach as a frame, then perhaps we can see the benefits of the approach. This ride should be constructive (I hope), filled with surprises, chaos, challenges, and probably annoyances. I am hoping, however, you enjoy the overall trip.

In giving this translation metaphor as an entrée into the book, however, I want the readers to rest assured that intercultural rhetoric and professional communication cannot be reduced to translation issues; in fact, often when my Juárez doctoral students and I wrestle with important concepts of empirical methodology, we conclude that it does not matter whether we are discussing the concepts in English or Spanish; it’s much more complicated than that. Translation is an issue in intercultural professional communication, but there’s a whole more to it than that. Thus, this the scope of this book ranges from
problems of violence and ethics to word-to-word translation, a very large scope indeed. For example, it looks at the structure and presentation of a simple set of instruction but connects that set to very large legal, economic, social, and industrial values. In many ways, the presentation of the different documents, web, or curriculum designs demonstrate that language is just one of the many variable connected to intercultural rhetoric and professional communication.

**LAYOUT AND APPROACH TO THE BOOK**

This book is organized into three basic parts. Chapter One lays out a comprehensive framework for approaching intercultural rhetoric and professional communication, carefully defining culture, rhetoric, and intercultural rhetoric. Chapter One also explores the ethical dimensions of intercultural rhetoric and the need to revise many contemporary theories and methodologies in rhetoric, professional communication, and cultural studies. Chapter Two grounds that comprehensive framework of theories and methodologies in a discussion of eight common variables for intercultural rhetorical research. It first provides the metaphor of the border as an example of these variables and then explores the relation of these variables to patterns of intercultural rhetoric, drawing on the wealth of intercultural research in organizational behavior, linguistics, and international relations. This chapter then exemplifies the intercultural approach by evaluating Anzaldúa’s *The Borderlands*.

Chapter Three further grounds this intercultural approach, connecting it to theories of linguistic relativity from contrastive rhetoric, showing how many differences in culture have strong connections to languages. It also discusses the relevance of English and Chinese as world-dominating languages. Chapter Four is parallel to Chapter Three because it argues for the influence of a very important intercultural medium, but instead of connecting the intercultural variables to language, it connects them to technologies. It constructs the theories of fit, reciprocity, and kairos in intercultural contexts, showing how some communication media fit better cultures with certain predominant values, that this fit corresponds to distinct reciprocal relations of culture and rhetoric, and that the timing of discourse events needs to be grounded in the predominant values of the context.

 Chapters Five through Ten apply these comprehensive theories to six specific intercultural professional contexts: website design and analysis (Five); organizational behavior (Six); distance education and e-training (Seven); law and legal traditions (Eight); health literacy and communications (Nine); and instructions and manuals (Ten). Chapters 11 and 12 connect the theory, methods, and applications discussed in Chapters One-Ten to the classroom and research. Chapter 11 lays out a set of core competences and criteria for designing and conducting intercultural education and research.

Chapter 12 demonstrates my approach to intercultural education, detailing an intercultural writing class I routinely teach at New Mexico State University; and it explores the cultural approaches to three predominant U.S. textbooks in writing and professional communication, showing educators how to de-naturalize their approaches to intercultural and global writing. Finally, the Conclusion discusses issues of translation, globalization, and localization, showing how to use the book to carry out these important services for intercultural contexts.
CHALLENGES AND CONTRIBUTIONS

As will be evident, the challenges to writing this book have been many. First, the methodological and theoretical challenges are unique, from my perspective. Despite the rich, detailed, and rigorous approaches of intercultural research in organizational behavior, anthropology, law, and intercultural communications, many scholars in rhetoric and professional communication are usually not familiar with this history or their familiarity is obtained through superficial and uninformed, often second-hand critiques of that very research and history. Thus, much of the current intercultural research in rhetoric and professional communication either ignores this body of research and rather superficially examines intercultural issues such as translation of currency, numbers, and symbols or issues of technology access and use. Or even worse, some research examines intercultural situations without the benefit and experience of this long history, committing serious and often ethnocentric errors in theories and methodologies. In other words, the academic community in rhetoric and professional communication seems not prepared to work across cultures. Hopefully, this book will provide some starting points and useful contributions. Regardless of whether the reader agrees with my approaches, I hope he or she at least can engage the issues that I believe are worth engaging. These issues seem to revolve around the nature of culture, language, social constructions, and all the institutions involving intercultural encounters, globalization, and intercultural relations.

Secondly, another re-occurring issue throughout the book is my argument that many U.S. scholars in rhetoric and professional communication relentlessly denaturalize approaches to culture, writing, and communication, while their foundations for doing so are based on U.S. cultural values of individualism, universalism, low-context communications, specificity orientation, and other U.S. values. In other words, these scholars do not denaturalize the very methods and assumptions they use to denaturalize rhetoric and culture. Consequently, many of the current approaches in rhetoric and professional communication presuppose basic rhetorical assumptions such as author-audience relations, need for information, document or communication organizational strategies, and stylistic preferences that are based on U.S. cultural values and are at best unworkable in other cultural contexts. This ethnocentrism extends to the valuing in U.S. theories, methods, and curriculum of certain rhetorical objectives (such as U.S. democratic purposes), rhetorical processes (co-constructive of meaning), and rhetorical relations in the context (U.S. organizational behavior). This ethnocentrism is perhaps ok in U.S. contexts, but across cultures, it causes all sorts of problems. These critiques will seem to most unduly broad, but perhaps in the light of this book are not too much of a stretch.

One of the most significant problems of this U.S-centric approach, which this book soundly engages with, is the penchant for much current theory to valorize the local-only approaches to culture and communication. Based on U.S. versions of poststructuralism and postcolonial theory, many of these local approaches are finding their ways into intercultural theory, which present problems of ethnocentrism and poorly developed methods and inquiries. Thus, as I explain elsewhere (Thatcher, 2010), despite a strongly emerging and complexly formed globalization, much research and theory in rhetoric and professional communication still rely on outdated critical and cultural studies models that are based on local approaches. Not surprisingly, using local approaches for global inquiries presents serious problems, including ethnocentrism, methodological aporia, poorly theorized global-local relations, ignoring large-scale variables (such as global markets, outsourced manufacturing, and law), and unworkable ethics. Thus consequently, professional communication scholars need to carefully re-develop these theories and methodologies to work successfully in global and intercultural professional contexts. This book provides a framework for doing so.
Finally, this book is both detailed and exhaustive on the other hand, and sketchy and abstract on the other. The first four chapters concretely and comprehensively lay out the theories and methodologies of intercultural inquiry for professional communication, based on extensive research, theory, and experiences. Chapters Five through Ten, however, sketch a broad framework for understanding how rhetoric works in the specific intercultural rhetorical contexts such as website designs and health communications. Thus, while Chapters One-Four are carefully crafted theoretical and methodological pieces, the application pieces in Chapters Five-Ten are much more exploratory, trying to bring together rather disparate bodies of theories and methodologies and make some coherence places and points for further inquiry. Unfortunately, many of these application chapters are based on my analysis of intercultural rhetorical contexts without the benefit of a more developed body of research. Chapters Eleven and Twelve are based on some theory and research but mostly my long experience teaching intercultural rhetoric and writing. But that’s where the theory and research in intercultural professional communication are. Thus, the frame of the book models the state of inquiry of our field of intercultural rhetoric and professional communication. Ojalá que el libro sea el medio para avanzar este estado de investigación.

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