

Chapter 1

Approaching Intercultural Rhetoric and Professional Communication

ABSTRACT

This chapter defines professional communication in intercultural contexts. It presents a workable model of culture, connects that model to rhetoric, and provides a method to analyze rhetorics and cultures in intercultural contexts. It also contextualizes the model of intercultural rhetorical research in prevailing paradigms of rhetoric and professional communication, strongly criticizing the local-only and ethno-centric modes that are so in fashion. It then presents a global model of rhetorical inquiry.

INTRODUCTION TO INTERCULTURAL RHETORIC AND PROFESSIONAL COMMUNICATION

As most major intercultural scholars and theorists have argued, the purpose of an intercultural inquiry is to understand relevant cultural similarities and differences across groups of people (Hofstede, 2010; House, et al, 2005; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). This argument is fairly simple in principle, yet profoundly complex in practice, especially for professional communication, the topic of this book. First, what does it mean to *understand* cultural differences and similarities? Is knowing superficial cultural differences such as those explained in lists of cultural taboos (see for example,

McGraw Hill's series Kissbowshakehands.com) a sufficient understanding of a target culture? As this book explains, approaching an intercultural situation with a list of do's and don'ts probably does more damage than good. Rather, it is much more effective to understand how deeply held, but hidden values structure a variety of activities, essentially explaining the *why* and *what* of social behavior. Second, what are *relevant* cultural differences? For example, some cultural scholars like to focus on unique fragments of pottery, weapons, and clothing that are often part of museum displays (Bakhtin, 1990), while others focus on popular culture or consumerism and transnational organizations (Hall, 1997). However, as this book explains, the most relevant cultural differences and similarities for intercultural professional

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communication are those generalized or bell curve patterns of everyday activities (Bourdieu, 1999), such as lining up at a bank, giving instructions about a new technology, negotiating a business transaction, or enforcing policies and procedures in an organization.

The next question focuses on how we define and operationalize the relations between *culture* and *rhetoric*. Does rhetoric simply reflect cultural values, or does it refract them based on mutually constructive relations? Or can rhetoric have the power to reconstitute cultural patterns or vice versa? In other words, how do rhetoric and culture influence or act upon each other? These questions are critical for intercultural inquiry because they directly assess human agency, rhetorical purpose, and corresponding ethics. As this book explains, *culture* is a group of people that share a common sense of humanity, epistemology, ideology, and rhetorical patterns (Berlin, 1987). This shared definition of humanity creates a distinct epistemology, both of which imply an ideology or appropriate social behaviors; and all three encourage corresponding rhetorical patterns. The rhetorical patterns then mutually influence and inscribe themselves upon the previous three categories.

This view does not assume that individuals within a culture share a unified relation to their values or that cultures are monolithic and static, two attributions that some in rhetoric and professional communication (Hunsinger, 2006) level at intercultural research based on their innumeracy or inability to distinguish a cultural generalization from a cultural trait (Pinker, 2003). Rather, it assumes a bell-curve distribution of these values, that is, a group of people are distinguished as a culture, because a majority in that group shares the same values, but there are always exceptions on both sides of the bell curve. This is precisely the approach of most intercultural researchers such as Hofstede (2010), Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000), House, et al (2005), and many others. Further, this sharing of values can happen at many levels and is not necessarily at the

nation-state level such as Mexico and the United States, which is the focus of many researchers and this book. However, the approach articulated in this book can easily be operationalized at a variety of smaller levels such as institutional, disciplinary, regional or even local. In fact, this intercultural approach is highly effective at the personal and local level because it shows how an individual draws on a variety of rhetorical strategies for daily sense-making activities.

Next, how do we compare *similarities and differences* across groups of people? Do we compare the groups at the personal, local, regional, ethnic, linguistic, or global level? This is the problem of the one and many or of the level of analysis that we use to categorize people according to cultural constructions. As this book explains, most contemporary rhetorical and professional communication approaches (Scott, Longo, and Willis, 2007; Herndl & Nahrwold, 2000; Sullivan & Porter, 1998) are unreflexively entrenched in the local and individualistic theories. Using the individual or local, however, as a unit of analysis for cross-cultural comparison presents many significant problems, including ethnocentrism, invalid gathering and analysis of data, poorly theorized global-local relations, ignoring large-scale variables (such as global markets, outsourced manufacturing, and law), and unworkable ethics (see Thatcher, 2010a). Instead of looking at the uniqueness of one group and then moving to another, intercultural researchers need to recognize similarities of groups of people (at a variety of levels) based on shared contexts and then consider differences within the framework of these similarities (see Thatcher, 2010a; Thatcher, 2001; Jarvis & Pavlenko, 2008; Hofstede, 2010; Lucy, 1996; Bhawuk & Triandis, 1996). This process works against analyzing a second culture using the cultural constructs of the first culture (Bhawuk & Triandis, 1996) because it establishes a common ground in which to operationalize and compare the variables of both cultures in the intercultural context (Lucy, 1996).

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