

# Chapter 10

## Writing Instructions and How-to-do Manuals across Cultures

### ABSTRACT

*This chapter demonstrates how culture structures and is embedded in instructional manuals around the world. It examines two car repair instructions from Japan and the United States and two charcoal grill assembly instructions. It provides key units of analysis for professional communicators writing instructional materials for intercultural contexts.*

### INTRODUCTION

Despite the relevance of instructional design for intercultural organizational training, outsourced manufacturing, health care, and distance education, little work has been carried out in writing instructions across cultures. The work that exists includes Honold (1999) who compares Chinese and German cell phone manuals and argues that Chinese cell phone manuals were often a very terse in explaining many of the functions, because they assumed or even asked the users to seek help from their friends. On the other hand, the German manual tried to create an independent cell phone user because the quality of the German manual rested on its ability to independently provide all of the necessary information. Dong (2007) compared Chinese and U.S. heater manuals, positively correlating the cultural values of China and the United States to the different instructional designs.

However, despite this minimal work, we have not systematically assessed elements of instructional design for cross-cultural contexts. For example, I recently started a project to educate residents of U.S.-Mexico border *colonias* in water sanitation and appropriate septic system use. Colonias are undeveloped, poor, and often rural communities that generally lack water and sewer infrastructure, and as a correlation, have higher incidences of infectious and gastro-intestinal diseases.

Much work has focused on colonia health with many instructional materials developed to educate colonias residents. Figure 1 shows two pages of a *fotonovela* (drama-pamphlet) developed by the University of Texas-El Paso's Center for Environmental Resource Management (<http://research.utep.edu/Default.aspx?alias=research.utep.edu/cerm>). This Center develops and distributes this and many other educational documents for distribution to colonias.

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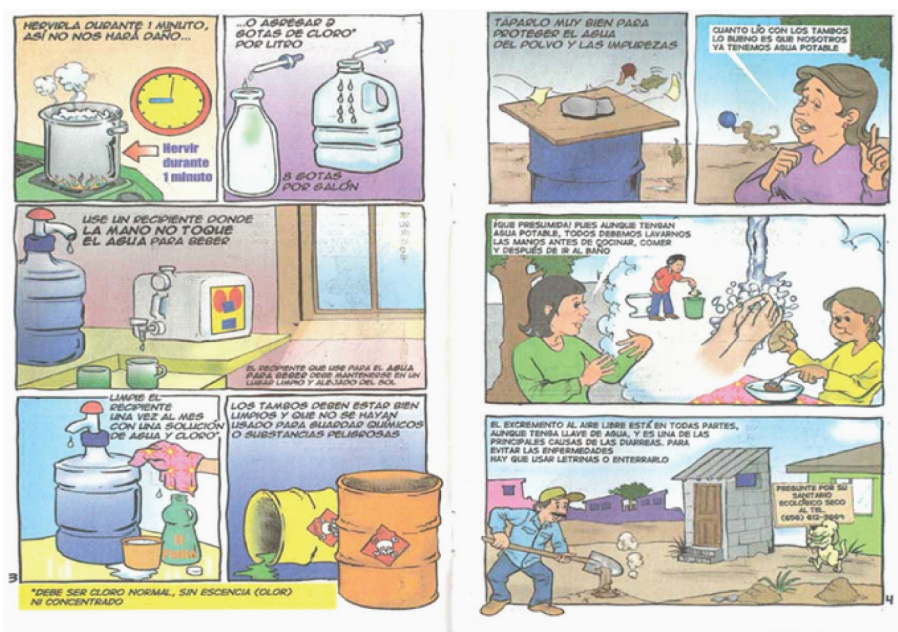
The left page shows how to sanitize water, and the right page discusses water safety and sewer (which I probably did not need to translate because the pictures are highly illustrative). Much as described in Chapter Nine, this instructional pamphlet follows many of the cultural patterns of Mexico, including its collective, high context, polychronic, and relations-based discussions (see Thatcher, 2006). It is also more visual than verbal, meeting the needs of a semi-literate population. The fotonovela is a very standardized approach in the border area for instructional contexts.

The instructional design, however, has many potential problems. First, it makes the mistake of treating the semi-literate adult population like children, not adults. This is like teaching adults a second language using the same methods as with children. Much research in adult education and second language studies severely critiques this approach. Second, and perhaps just as important, the instructional design does not counter-act some of the problems with the cultural design. As Stewart & Bennett argue (1991), "Each culture possesses

integrity, and generally speaking, is neither inferior nor superior to any other culture. But in a structured situation and for a specific purpose, one cultural system may in fact work better than another" (p. 175). In other words, cultural values have pros and cons in specific structured situation. And in this situation, some of the cons of Mexican culture are apparent in the instructional design.

First, the narrative, drama-like approaches are very effective for demonstrating a problem, but often very weak at solving it, especially in situations that are minimally different, often inspiring an "exceptions to rules" mentality (Thatcher, 2000). Second, the relations-based approach is effective at modeling responsibilities and tasks, but when these exact relations models are not in place, users are resistant to perform work based on different models because they feel un-empowered to do so. Third, and similarly, when high-context approaches are used (showing specific contextual details), transferring the instructions from one context to another is difficult (see Thatcher, 2001; Thatcher, 2006). What we don't know, however, is

Figure 1. UTEP pamphlet on Water and Sewer Sanitation



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