

Chapter 12

Teaching Intercultural Rhetoric and Professional Communication

ABSTRACT

This chapter first examines the cultural and rhetorical assumptions implicit in three popular U.S. rhetoric and writing textbooks, denaturalizing the U.S. foundation for these texts and showing how to adapt them to global and intercultural contexts. The second part describes an intercultural rhetoric and writing class that I have been teaching for 13 years, including syllabus, course goals, assignments, teaching strategies, and assessments. It provides the first comprehensive model of an intercultural rhetoric and writing class.

INTRODUCTION

As a U.S. intercultural researcher, teacher, and practitioner, one of the most interesting tensions or troubling contradictions that I face daily is to understand some of the deep diversity around the world, while I simultaneously witness constant references to U.S. diversity but sense that this U.S. diversity is perhaps quite shallow. For example, as I have shown in Chapter Five, university websites designs in the United States are strongly homogenized, closely following the cultural and rhetorical values attributed to the United States by intercultural researchers. And much of my field research points to homogenized U.S. professional communication patterns, as compared, for example, to the diversity that exists among Latin American countries (Thatcher, 1999; 2000; 2006; 2010). My perception about the lack of

true global or intercultural diversity in the United States is shared by almost all U.S. intercultural researchers who have worked outside the United States (Bennett, 1998; Stewart & Bennett, 1991; Kras, 1991; Adler, 2008; Condon, 1997) as well as non-U.S. researchers who have worked in the United States (Castaneda, 1995). Most of these researchers argue that U.S. homogenization is largely historical and linguistic, based on U.S. isolation, individualism, and English as the de facto language. I think it also has much to do with U.S. education systems, which, though seemingly diverse, still draw on traditional U.S. cultural values. And I have felt that much of the intercultural professional communication research coming out of the United States is either focused on relatively surface features such as time, money denominations, and translation, or it is bound up in the local approach (Hunsinger, 2007), implicitly reinforcing U.S. cultural values.

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Another troubling feeling I have of this diversity is that I have watched many non-U.S. students enroll in U.S. graduate programs in rhetoric and professional communication, and before too long, some either demonstrate strong values of individualism based and the local approach; strong denunciations of stereotypes, based on U.S.-like universalism; and many rhetorical patterns of specific and monochronic orientation, including directness, thesis statements, and linear development. Or others struggle through programs with faculty and committee advisors not understanding the difficulty in developing U.S. rhetorical competencies. Of course, many students might have been inclined for or against U.S.-like cultural and rhetorical patterns in the first place, and certainly they must be adept at handling them or they will not succeed, but I sincerely wonder about the effects of this enculturation.

In this context of shallow diversity, I become even more worried about the Anzaldúa-like diversity that I critique at the end of Chapter Two. There, I argue that U.S. diversity seems to mean bringing in other races, ethnicities, and other so called diverse traits, romanticizing the surface features of this diversity, and then integrating these people into U.S. cultural and rhetorical systems, masking the deep U.S. foundation for this integration, and calling it diversity. This critique is profoundly difficult for many Anzaldúa fans to understand because the great sophistication and complexity of Anzaldúa's derridian approach to language and identity are refreshing and seem to correspond to complex and deep-rooted diversity. However, when viewed from a global/intercultural context, this complexity is strongly based on U.S. assumptions about writing and corresponding foundations of individualism, universalism, specific orientation, achievement orientation, and low power distance communication styles. Consequently, this approach is simply masquerading as diversity, but it really is U.S. ethnocentrism. In other words, this "diversity" would be extremely difficult to carry out outside U.S. cultures. Not

surprisingly, all of my Mexican colleagues who do research in rhetoric and culture have never even heard of Anzaldúa, and when they do read her, they very quickly situate her as a U.S. Tejana.

In this context of shallow diversity, I also have wondered about U.S. rhetoric and writing curriculum and associated textbooks: how truly diverse are they? Matveeva (2007) has shown that the global elements in most U.S. professional communication textbooks are based on anecdotal, taboo-based approaches, further emphasizing the naïve individualism I describe in Chapters Two and Eleven. And Bracken Scott (2010) discusses the dearth of valid and relevant work in intercultural teaching for rhetoric and professional communication. In Chapter Eleven, I address many of these program and curricular issues, focusing on the criteria for evaluating their intercultural effectiveness. But in this chapter, I am more interested in U.S. mainstream approaches to rhetoric and writing and the cultural and rhetorical assumptions in their approaches. How much do they base their approaches on naturalized U.S. cultural and rhetorical values? Or how open are they to global and intercultural diversity? And what kinds of cultural and rhetorical adaptations must non-U.S. students face, either implicitly or explicitly, when enrolling in U.S. university composition and professional communication classes?

This chapter seeks to explore these questions. The first section examines and denaturalizes the cultural and rhetorical values in three of the most popular writing and professional communication textbooks in the United States, demonstrating the kinds of adaptations that students from other cultures most likely have to carry out when using these textbooks. The second section describes an intercultural writing class that I have been teaching at New Mexico State University for ten years. Based on the core competencies of teaching and research described in Chapter Eleven, this section describes the goals, assignments, processes, and assessment criteria for the course. This kind of course presents a different approach to diversity,

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