THINKING ABOUT SOCIAL JUSTICE
Interrogating the *international* in international technical communication discourse

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Our field is deeply involved in the complex processes of globalization, processes that not only entail opportunities and benefits for businesses, professions, and human lives but that also often sweep through cultural, social, environmental, and economic domains in destructive ways (Savage & Mattson, 2011, p. 5).

Overview

Intercultural technical communication is a very prominent feature in technical communication (TC) discourse (Agboka, 2012), but its social justice implications have yet to be fully investigated. Thus, social justice research in TC has not kept pace with the explosion of work in
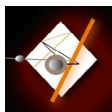
intercultural technical communication. Yet, technical communication continues to shape human lives in international contexts in many ways. In his keynote address at the 2002 Council for Programs in Technical and Scientific Communication (CPTSC) meeting, Huckin (2003) questioned why little attention was given in the field of TC to the "sociopolitical aspects of globalization" (p. 1). Cognizant of Huckin's concern, Grabill (2005) called for a pedagogy of civic engagement to train "educated people capable of thinking critically about the sociopolitical issues" (p. 276). Has our current research and scholarly trajectory addressed these concerns?

As a scholar committed to social justice, I call for a paradigm shift in international technical communication (ITC) research and scholarship. I invite more research and scholarship involving specific case studies, research methodological approaches, and analyses of communication practices that intersect with social justice in international contexts, particularly in areas that have become known in political-economic discourse as unenfranchised "third" or even "fourth world" nations—many of which are affected by technical communication practices and discourse.

My call is circumscribed in my belief that, on a national level at least, the industrialized nations (i.e., "first" and "second world" nations) can fend for themselves very well. Thus, generally, issues of cultural accommodations, localization, translation, and so forth between the US and Western Europe, China, and a number of Middle Eastern nations are primarily matters of more efficient marketing and maintaining competitive edges among a more or less equal pack of

multinational companies. However, it's an entirely different set of stakes when it comes to much of Africa, South East Asia, Central and South America, among others. Of course, this does not mean there are not marginalized, colonized, continually exploited, and oppressed cultural groups within first and second world nations. For example, in many "developed" sites throughout the world there is a loose confederation of indigenous peoples that refer to themselves as the fourth world (e.g., Native Americans, Alaska Natives, and numerous ethnic groups elsewhere, including Australia, New Zealand, Scandinavia, and possibly almost every nation on earth), who also deserve attention.

Ultimately, as Savage and Mattson (2011) argue, our obligation is to ensure social justice for marginalized groups of people who may lose more than they gain from the effects of intercultural communication and global business (p. 5). But how do we undertake this task of activism?

International Technical Communication (ITC) So Far

The trajectory of intercultural technical communication research over the years points to many positive possibilities—albeit needing a consistent paradigmatic shift in focus. For example, since its evolution more than two decades ago, the emerging field of ITC has made useful gains through translation objectives (Byrne, 2006; Hann, 2004; Maylath, 1997; Sager, 1993; Somers, 1996; Weiss, 1995), localization practices (Hoft, 1995; Hunsinger, 2011; Major & Yoshida, 2007; McCool, 2006; Sun, 2004, 2006, 2009; Thayer & Kolko, 2004; Warren, 2002),

innovations in pedagogical approaches (Boiarsky, 1995; Bosley, 2001; Goby, 1999; Thrush, 1993; Tippens, 1993), and cross-cultural collaboration projects (Bosley, 1993; Starke-Meyerring, & Wilson, 2008). Ultimately, scholarship in these areas has broadened our understanding of the relevance and merits of language, culture, usability, and contexts in ITC settings.

As Agboka (2013) notes, however, more often than not culture and language are singled out—or overemphasized—as heroes in international technical communication success stories, usually neglecting the role of broader ideological, legal, political, economic, and social justice issues in the practice of technical communication in international contexts (p. 29). When we become too fixated on these factors alone, we risk not understanding them (i.e., language and cultural factors) as always already tied to their historical, legal, political, and economic contexts.

In essence, the challenges of intercultural technical communication go beyond just language and culture. As the field of professional and technical communication crosses borders, technical communication becomes a site of struggle where power, ideologies, and identities are constituted, reconstituted, shaped, and reshaped through the intricate interactions between such complicated factors as culture, language, ideology, and communication (Bokor, 2011).

Case Study Research

I have been conducting three installments of a case study research that investigates the marketing and distribution of intercultural pharmaceutical products in two cultural contexts (i.e., some sites in South East Asia and Ghana). In the first installment—which employs action research strategies, and based on which conclusions are drawn in this article (Blyler 1998; Grabill, 2000; Clark, 2004; Craig, 2009)—I investigated the poor efforts of designers in the transfer of communication supporting aphrodisiacs designed in one cultural context and transported to another cultural context. As a consequence of designer marketing priorities and weak political border systems prevailing at the user's site, the documentation accompanying these aphrodisiacs was not only provided in a language inaccessible to users, but those that met the linguistic requirements were also poorly situated culturally.

The findings of the research point to how designers/manufacturers taking advantage of weak legal, economic, and political systems in the target culture circumvented important legal, ethical, cultural, and linguistic issues prevailing at the target culture, thus resulting in usability and health problems for the users.

The Way Forward

It is my position that the existing approaches to ITC are not very effective in helping address current challenges and emerging demands in specific cultural sites. Yet, admittedly, the issue of what should be done is not simple, linear, or clear-cut, as it requires complex practices and research studies in specific sites.

What is crucial, though, is that the field of technical communication needs a coherent body of methodological, research, and scholarly approaches that

- are cognizant of local contexts and their histories;
- will reach out in more democratic and liberatory ways; and
- serve the needs of both designers and users.

A good starting point is to (re)examine approaches and objectives of international technical communication, particularly in this age of postmodern globalization. Furthermore, we need to assess whether these objectives can help us meet the challenges of globalization. Doing these can provide more effective resources for training students, practitioners, and professionals for successful intercultural technical communication, beyond the instrumental angle of technical communication. ■

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