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Lance Cummings
*Miami University*

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**1 author:**

Lance Cummings
University of North Carolina at Wilmington

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# Comparison as a mode of inquiry: Rearticulating the contexts of intercultural communication

**Lance Cummings**
Miami University, USA

## Introduction

Comparative inquiry has a long history in the scientific, sociological, and linguistic traditions that embody much of the work being done in English studies, including technical, professional, and intercultural communication. Generally speaking, comparative methods are often used to explain variation in human behavior, often with the assumption that there is a common source from which this variation springs, whether it be historical change, cognitive structures like universal grammar, social entities, or just "human nature." As we move into what Wendy Hesford (2006) called the"global turn" in English studies, the phenomena of globalization and shifting classroom, cultural, and communicative ecologies has called scholars to question the very premises from which we cast our comparative inquiries. In the past, comparative inquiry has been intricately tied to notions of civilization that several scholars trace back to Greek and Roman efforts to categorize diverse sets of peoples that varied from their own cultures (Bock, 1966; Denzin & Lincoln, 2007; Vidich & Lyman, 2001), thus attaching colonialist and imperialist ways of knowing to the act of comparison — a connection thoroughly critiqued throughout English studies (Chatterjee, 1993; Lowe, 1991; Pennycook, 1998; Said, 1978). Such historical ties to the comparative act should not invalidate these methodologies; rather, these sedimentations (or habits of methodological representation) should call for the rearticulation of comparative inquiry. Too often, variations in cultures, human behavior, rhetoric, or language use are seen as obstacles to developing national and cultural relationships, or problems to be solved, rather than generative moments of interaction, where new knowledge is being formed.

In intercultural communication and rhetoric, variations of use, whether of English or web design, tend to get lost between what are usually called global and local approaches to research (Hawisher, Selfe, Guo, & Liu, 2006; Hoft, 1999; Starke-Meyerring, 2005; Thatcher, 2010). Comparative work is most often associated with etic interpretative frames that use researcher perspectives to make comparisons across macrosocial units, like culture, nation, class, race, ethnicity, etc. (Ragin, 1987, p. 3). In other words, a researcher notes possible variation among individuals, cultures, or contexts and sets up a systematic (or etic) framework for interpreting that variation from the point of view of the scientist or researcher. Such etic frameworks are often constructed by quantitative means using models or ideal types to compare the absence or presence of particular variables within those models, implying fairly static and uniform elements of comparison. Quantitative research tends to be seen as more suited to global approaches, using de-identified data and variable analysis to study artifacts outside of their natural settings, for example compiling a group of websites across cultures in order to create a data set that is then analyzed outside actual ecologies of use. Qualitative research, on the other hand, is a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" or "a set of interpretative, material practices that make the world visible" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 4). Qualitative research seeks mostly emic frames, or insider points of view, largely basing comparisons across cases on "configurations of historical and contextual interrelationships," making more local and tentative observational claims (Ragin, 1987, p. 3). Local approaches tend to be more interpretative and are naturally more suited for qualitative research because they seek a more local perspective. In contrast, quantitative research is often seen as "the measurement and analysis of causal relationships between variables, not processes," which generally claim to be "value-free" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2007, p. 14). But behind either of these methodologies are individual observers who are historically and culturally bound, both relying on interpretative frames, though perhaps explicit to different degrees.

These three dichotomies (global/local, quantitative/qualitative, etic/emic) are becoming less productive on their own as writing and communicative spaces become networked in increasingly fluid and ever-changing ways, and the act of comparison becomes more complicated (DePew, 2007; Fraiberg, 2010; Hawisher et al., 2006; McKee & DeVoss, 2007). On one hand, interpretative approaches to local spaces often fail to look outside geographical, institutional, and cultural space to contextualize the relationships under interrogation, none of which originate in that space, but arrive there via various routes of interchange, making qualitative research difficult to apply to broader communicative problems most often envisioned in technical and professional communication. On the other hand, generalizations based on empirical data are themselves interpretations and occur in their own local spaces (that of the researcher), though these spaces are often invisible. Generative and productive approaches to variation can be lost within the interstices of macrosocial units that these perspectives invoke.

In the process of comparing, these macrosocial units become concretized or sedimented:

> In order to compare societies or any other macrosocial unit, the comparativist must identify them by name. The comparativist thus assumes, at least implicitly, that macrosocial units are real and then defines them, sometimes by default, in the course of research. (Ragin, 1987, p. 5)

Therefore, one could define comparison as a process by which macrosocial units are created, maintained, and performed. Rearticulating comparison provides an alternative framework that contests, critiques, and reshapes these macrosocial units, but in dialogue with this comparativist stance—not as an opposition. In technical communication, or even multilingual writing, the goal is often to "solve" breakdowns and obstacles in communications by using macrosocial units as a heuristic. Though this is a valuable task, these frameworks can potentially become overly rigidified for applications in local contexts. This requires adaptations to methodologies in comparison that can observe how cultures transform and interact with each other, not as discrete units, but as constantly becoming networks.

In phenomenology, *sedimentation* refers to the grounds of thinking or "evidences" that, once worked out, layer themselves in our "intellectual history," often disappearing from our direct examination (Sokolowski, 1999, loc. 2250 ). Drawn from geological vocabulary, sedimentation represents the movement and repetition of matter (or structured performances) within the fluidity of time (or history). These movements often settle into a more permanent state through habit, giving shape to the ecologies (or conditions and contexts) around us through institutions, rituals, and discourse. Thus, ways of making comparisons, and the macrosocial units they produce, can become sedimented, inhibiting the construction of new knowledge in these more fluid environments. In this sense, comparison is always a historically produced and sedimented act, though not always examined as such. This is no more true than in intercultural and online spaces. Methods of comparison can simplify these ecologies, particularly when considering pre-existing assumptions about language and culture. Too often we refer to these sedimentations as ontological realities, but the goal in comparative inquiry should not always be to reify social entities, but rather to rearticulate them in useful ways for the diverse settings in intercultural and professional communication. By operationalizing macrosocial units, researchers are also concretizing them, requiring us to consider more transnational methodologies that can bring these sedimentations under scrutiny by including them in the comparative process.

In her article "Configurations of transnationality: Locating feminist rhetorics," Wendy Hesford (2008) outlined three comparative approaches developed in English studies that have also informed much of comparative inquiry in rhetoric and professional communication, particularly the last two: (1) comparative rhetorics, (2) contrastive rhetorics, and (3) intercultural communication/rhetorics (p. 464). Hesford relied on developing *transnational* methodologies to critique and inform these three modes of comparison. In short, *transnationalism* refers to the "movements of people, goods, and ideas across national borders," foregrounding notions of "hybridity and intertextuality" (p. 463). Transnational methodologies tend to highlight sedimented notions of the nation-state and culture used within comparative inquiry, calling to question the static nature of such categories and how they are operationalized as focal points in comparison. Developing comparison as a mode of inquiry, or methodology, that accepts the relational and fluid nature of intercultural spaces requires recursively reflecting on the ways comparison plays a part in shaping the contexts and conditions of comparison across complicated relational networks.

## Re-articulating the comparative act

By identifying comparison as a mode of inquiry, I am building off what Ming Xie (2011) called "comparative intercultural inquiry" (p. 1). Xie defined inquiry as "a mode of ongoing and open-ended self-reflexivity," particularly in how we construct knowledge: "We try to know by reflecting on the forms and categories of our knowing" (p. 4). This particular mode or methodology is not simply seeking to understand other cultures, or even intercultural spaces, but to understand how we know and represent other cultures through the construction of knowledge. In other words, the act of comparison becomes a part of the comparative inquiry. What are the conditions that shape our comparisons, and how is comparative knowledge constructed? Comparison is not a static set of logical rules or systematic frames; rather, comparison is a performative and situated act that requires this open-ended self-reflexitivity. Therefore, as a mode of inquiry, comparisons are rhetorical performances that must be seen both as contingent and reflective, informed by the ecologies they inhabit. Though Xie did often rely on macrosocial units, as comparativists are wont to do, he makes room for more liminal and transitory notions of culture, creating the sense that culture, though often firmly sedimented, is constantly in a state of becoming. Comparative work, then, must take into account the fluctuating nature of cultural representations, which are constantly being shaped, contested, and remixed through variation—and comparison itself participates in this process. In other words, we construct comparative knowledge while producing it because meaning in intercultural spaces is “fluid, plural, and above all contextual” (p. 28). Researchers are not just observing intercultural spaces, they are creating them. This rearticulation of comparison as a mode of inquiry can provide flexible methodologies to professional communication, particularly as we continue to research intercultural communicative and online spaces that do not necessarily fit into the macrosocial units that comprise our etic frames.

These etic frames are constitutive of the comparative process, rather than merely external. In *Reassembling the Social*, Bruno Latour (2005) noted how frameworks can powerfully impact the theories being deployed in sociological research by making the creation of knowledge too fast or too easy: “As soon as a site is placed ‘into a framework,’ everything becomes rational much too fast and explanations begin to flow much too freely” (p. 127). This is similar to what Pierre Bourdieu (1991) called the theory effect: “Every theory, as the word itself suggests, is a program of perceptions, but this is all the more true of theories about the social world. And there are, no doubt, relatively few cases in which the structuring power of words, their capacity to prescribe while seeming to describe and to denounce while seeming to enunciate, is so clear” (p. 128). When comparing culture, language, or web design, a theory is always at work. Making reference to sociological or even cultural frames is a way of introducing biases that, on one hand, makes the work of comparison easier, but on the other hand, hides other networks and agents. One way of slowing down the comparative process, allowing for more fluid and flexible methods, is to “flatten” these networks through the reintroduction of our etic frames into the network as actors themselves (Latour, 2005, p. 192). In comparative rhetoric, this has been called “recontextualization.”

In his article “Reflective encounters: Illustrating comparative rhetoric,” LuMing Mao (2003) identified a major problem with etic frames—the tendency towards “deficiency models,” stemming from an over-reliance on “rhetorical universals” (p. 401). In other words, we look for forms of rhetoric in other cultures that have already been identified within the Western etic frame, as if these terms or forms were universal. Mao pointed to several instances where comparative stances tend to see deficiencies in cultures when these etic frames do not quite match up with emic perspectives. For example, elements of collective thinking in Chinese writing are often identified as a “lack” of individualism. Attributing such differences to a deficiency is problematic, particularly if other “social, cultural, and linguistic forces” are not taken into account (p. 408). Other formulations of rhetoric become less visible through this over-deterministic screen. Mao was suggesting that comparison move away from the “logic of

Orientalism" by rejecting "Western viewpoints as the only points of reference or origin," in order to create reflective encounters through "critical interrogation and informed contextualization" (p. 412). This requires more than simply qualifying our etic frames with emic perspectives, a comparative stance that tends to valorize our own frame of reference. Rather, etic and emic frames of reference should be placed within a more fluid and dialogical relationship. As a result, we can better understand the "Western rhetorical tradition" by learning about non-Western systems (p. 413).

On a more recent panel, Mao called this the art of recontextualization:

> I want to suggest that practicing the art of recontextualization constitutes a processual model that productively troubles our own modes of thinking and that seeks to privilege experiences over facts and relations of interdependence over structures of sameness or difference. An inevitable corollary of this model, then, is a strong ethical imperative. (Agnew et al., 2011, p. 119-120)

Granted, it may be impossible to entirely devalorize our own situated perspectives, but by recontextualizing our etic frames within the comparative inquiry as part of the performance itself, we can attain what Mao called a more "creative understanding," where "every etic/emic process begets a new one, and each process raises the level of understanding and enriches the modes of reflection" (p. 419). One way our comparative stances are informed by contextual elements is through these cultural biases and predispositions, or sedimentations that not only exist prior to our comparison but become a part of the comparison itself.

As a mode of inquiry, comparison can be a way to unsediment our thinking by methodically unearthing new biases or unthought perspectives: "It is a matter of shifting perspectives and of dislodging the fixity of native or current modes of thinking. Thinking the unthought has to do with the *expansiveness* of mind, rather than the abandonment of one's native tradition or repudiation of another way of thinking" (Xie, 2011, p. 44). My goal here is to shift comparative inquiry from a methodology that seeks to define relationships or categories to a methodology that seeks to create new ways of seeing our communication in intercultural contexts. The introduction of web technologies and more fluid uses of English into many intercultural communicative contexts highlights problems with methodological frames that rely on these sedimented categories. Two important contexts where new models are being developed lie in both cross-cultural web design and the multilingual writing classroom, both of which are beginning to intersect as more writing and communication occur in online and networked spaces.

## The new ecologies of comparison

Whether in the field of intercultural communication, comparative rhetoric, or linguistics, how culture and language is studied is largely determined by epistemologies that themselves have histories and sedimentations. For example, in multilingual writing, there are several divergences in epistemology and methodology that are rooted in the disciplinary histories of English studies, all of which influence how researchers approach the writing and language-learning classroom, often creating a gap between theory and the realities of the classroom (Brooke, 2013; Matsuda, 1998; Matsuda & Jablonski, 2000; Silva, 2005). As new phenomena like world englishes and interactive web design come under disciplinary scrutiny, how the developed methodologies within these disciplinary lenses adapt to these ecologies is not necessarily clear at first glance (Canagarajah, 2006; DePew, 2007; Fraiberg, 2010; Jenkins, 2006; Pandey, 2007; Seargeant, 2012). For example, very little in technical and professional communication has been studied from a world englishes point of view because variation in English use is often seen as a problem or failure in communication, most of which is often attributed to the non-native Other (Bokor, 2011). One can say the same about web design or web use: variation of use is seen as problematic, as opposed to productive. As the tacit monolingual policies of both the university and the professional world come under pressure from multilingual and translingual uses of English in various contexts (Canagarajah, 2006; Horner & Trimbur, 2002) or more interactional notions of online texts (DePew, 2007; Johnson, 1998; Schneider, 2005; Spinuzzi, 2005), researchers will be required to reexamine the historical and disciplinary sedimented frames used to make comparisons in online, professional, and technical contexts.

In her recent book, *Cross-Cultural Technology Design*, Huatong Sun (2012) summarized the three primary methodological sources for most research in cross-cultural web design, and arguably intercultural communication as a whole, each of which can be contextualized historically. These methodologies roughly coincide with much of the research being done in the multilingual writing classroom. The first methodology is simply the compilation of "dos and don'ts" that have been developed through various anecdotes and business cases, tending to "represent only the cultural conventions of a dominant culture in a country" (p. 9). This can roughly be associated with what is often called classroom "lore," the kinds of stories and tips shared among teachers (Ayer & Schubert, 1992). Such lists are short-sighted in dynamic intercultural contexts, both on the web and in the classroom, where users' relationships to the dominant culture may vary widely. For example, an assumption often exists in the multilingual classroom that Chinese students have a tendency to write inductively. In other words, instead of making a direct claim up front, for example in a thesis statement, Chinese writers often guide their reader through their argument, making their claim towards the end of the essay, while native speakers of English are more predisposed to write deductively, stating a main claim at the beginning of the essay. Therefore, such inductive essays are seen as lacking structure, lacking a thesis statement, or simply lacking directness (see video by ProofreadingService for an example). The inductive nature of Asian writing is a common assertion in intercultural communication, but mostly based on anecdotal evidence or small-scale case studies that assume nationality as the primary category of analysis (Jia, 2004; Scollon, Scollon, & Kirkpatrick, 2000; Scollon, Scollon, & Jones, 2011; Xue & Meng, 2007). One might call these informal etic frames that are later used more systematically in "value-oriented," quantitative studies.

Quantitative measures of cultural variables or values are useful ways to validate researchers' perspectives (or etic frames), though not without sacrifices. Take for instance the aforementioned hypothesis that Chinese writers of English tend to opt for more indirect methods of argumentation that are often labeled as inductive, a pattern that does generally show up quantitatively (Du-Babcock & Babcock, 1996; Scollon et al., 2000). Much of this work has been done at least a decade ago in contexts different than today, particularly with regard to multilingual and digital environments. The results of quantitative work can vary depending on the contexts from which the data is drawn, even though quantitative work attempts to simplify these contexts by replicating laboratory conditions as closely as possible, controlling variables by uniting "similarities and differences in a single, coherent framework" (Ragin, 1987, p. 19). As a result, value-oriented research tends to create homogenous masses as representative models. For example, while recent research has shown that Chinese academic writing in English still holds a strong preference for indirect methods (presumably based on the four-part model called "*qi-cheng-zhuan-he*") between 30%-40% of students chose a more direct or deductive style (Xue & Meng, 2007). Speaking from personal experience, I have noted many sophisticated uses of a more inductive approach to argument in Chinese student writing, but there have been many instances where Chinese students make use of rigid deductive structures that have equal impact on their academic discourse. In fact, I often find that many domestic students also have a tendency to write inductively in first year composition courses, though there is little research that discusses these patterns, perhaps because they are more likely to be attributed to "bad writing" or lack of experience, rather than to culture. In the process, statistical or data-driven methodologies focus on simplifying complexity to build models or typologies that can be more generally applied, which often requires the use of macrosocial units, such as the nation.

How students use particular patterns in writing can vary depending on context and their own understanding of the rhetorical situation. The same can be said for web design. How such cultural variables transfer to web design, particularly in Web 2.0 environments, can be quite complex, particularly where design features can be manipulated by different types of users— not just the designers. Rather than simply being correlated to culture or nationality, perceptions of web design should be correlated with other factors as well, such as user expectations, purpose of the web site, and perceptions of the task at hand. For example, discussions of collaboration or group work in both second language writing and professional communication often associate collaboration with more "collectivist" cultures, like those of East Asia (also associated with indirect or low context modes of communication). For example, many assume that students from these areas would work well with collaborative learning, but this approach often interacts in unexpected ways with other variables like power-distance (between teacher and student) and different notions of autonomy (Carson & Nelson, 1995; Holmes, 2004; Littlewood, 1999). Examining how collaborative writing functions in Web 2.0 environments has only just begun, but evidence points to collaborative writing as an effective method for language and writing acquisition, though the group dynamics, students' perceptions, and ways of using these spaces are variable and complex (Brine, Wilson, & Roy, 2007; Elola & Oskoz, 2010; Kessler, Bikowski, & Boggs, 2012). All of these factors play important roles when collaborating in technologically and linguistically diverse environments.

Case-oriented studies, or "structured fieldwork methods" as they are called by Sun (2012), can help define these rhetorical situations. In these kinds of studies, researchers seek to "focus on the richness and texture of everyday life" through "ethnomethodological" approaches that seek to observe communication or web use in their local contexts. In so doing, structured fieldwork methods recover the lost complexity in quantitative work by focusing on the heterogeneous nature of analytical categories (p. 10). In other words, case studies have more appreciation for complexity, whereas value-oriented studies look for more generalizability (Ragin, 1987, p. 54). Though most of these studies make detailed observations from an emic perspective, the systematic framework used for comparison can still be sedimented, even within more local experiences. In a recent class which happened to be split between domestic and international students from China, I assigned "The Chinatown idea" by Eric Liu (2010) for an ethnographic-like narrative assignment for first year composition. In this text, Liu went back and forth between various scenes in Chinatown and his own reflections on race and class. Much of the class interpreted this structure as disorganized or chaotic (or deficient in organization), until one of the Chinese students noted that the structure resembled what some in China call "scattered writing" (according to the student), which led to a deeper discussion of organization and structure. Within the original framework of inductive and deductive, this type of organization simply would not have shown up in a comparative analysis, illustrating how details can get lost in the interstices of our own etic frames. Emic perspectives can problematize and revise the categories we use for comparative analysis.

In web environments, correlating variables from quantitative approaches to the study of intercultural communication or writing is not easy. Interface can determine user behavior in different ways. For example, most wiki features on learning management systems encourage anonymous collaboration, lacking both synchronous editing and inline comments. The example in Figure 1 shows how easily the wiki adapts to information distribution by organizing pages of information that can potentially be collaboratively edited. Synchronous work can be done only in person, and individual contributions are difficult to track. Many of my international students from China hesitate to participate in wikis asynchronously because it is not polite to edit other people's text, though this notion is common among other students as well.

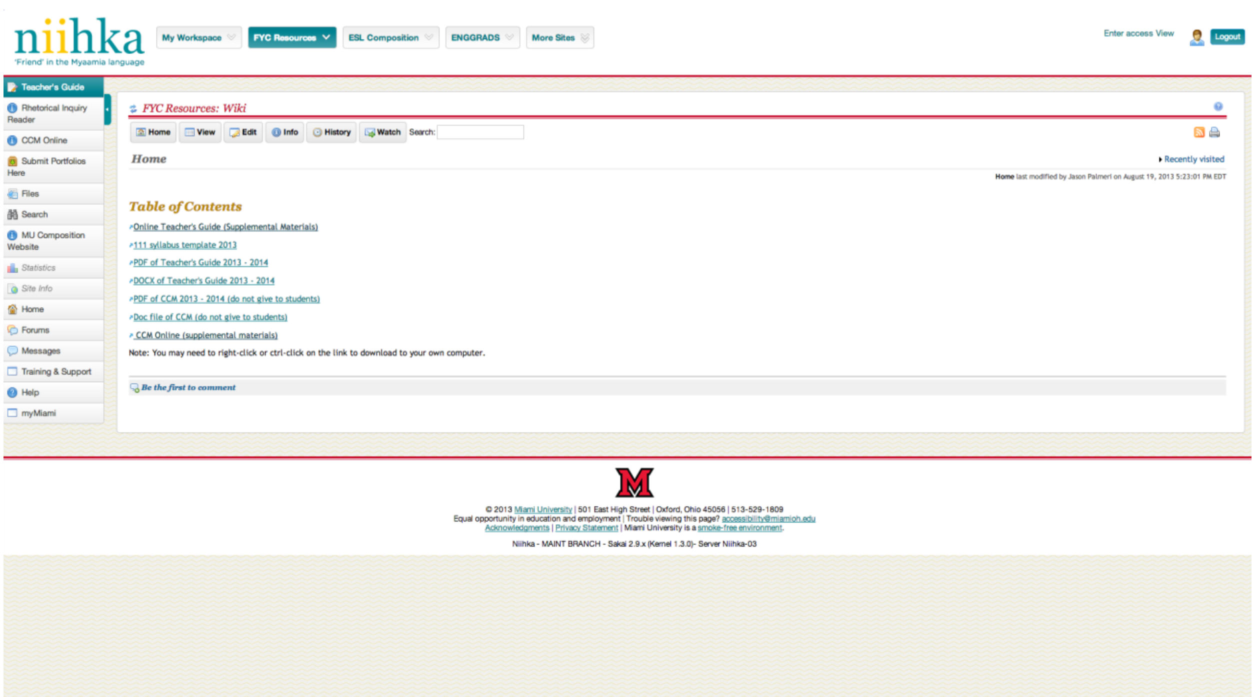


*Figure 1.* Example Wiki from Miami University's Sakai-Based Learning Management System

Google Docs, on the other hand, allows multiple modes of collaboration. Writers can type a document and submit it for peer review or commenting. Writers can also work on the document synchronously or work on the document asynchronously (and mostly anonymously). Or students can highlight their text in different colors to identify participants. None of these modes fit cleanly into an individual/collective frame, and each student or group may pick a different mode, depending on the specific context. Case-oriented studies can help identify some of these complexities for more quantitative studies, which can, in turn, help identify how cultural patterns may enter into these local contexts. In the end, recursive and interdependent research processes are critical for developing more flexible web environments that can adapt to multiple ways of using, just as a world englishes paradigm helps identify different ways englishes are used in diverse contexts.

In two recent IRB-approved case studies, I worked with international students in writing courses at a Midwestern university, asking them to reflect on their writing experiences both in the US and elsewhere, purposely looking for comparable emic perspectives from multiple contexts, not just from their experience of writing in the US.[1] Will, a Chinese student, cannot be identified simply as "Chinese," a category often used by quantitative, or even qualitative, studies. Before coming to study in the US, Will had already encountered transnational links to American academic discourse. When asked to describe his university experience, he referred to a summer camp in Shanghai organized by an American-based college. He had also encountered ideas about writing in English from various places before coming to the US. For example, nearly all students from China learn about writing in English first in preparation for standardized tests like the SAT or TOEFL:

> When I was preparing for the SAT test, I practice a lot in writing English. I first learn the requirements of the SAT essays, and then, I know what I am going to perform. I'm going to write in the way. . . will my essay mostly get a good score.

One possibility for the large portion of deductive writing among Chinese students may be from increased contact with other forms of academic discourse, the prevalence of standardized testing, or even the predominance of deductive templates distributed through software like Microsoft Office. But to ascertain this possibility, a quantitative study would have to be constructed that contests the macrosocial units sedimented by previous comparative modes. Qualitative research that focuses on emic perspectives can be placed in a dialogical relationship with quantitative work in a way that targets potential sedimentations, in order to further validate these models in specific contexts or propose unsedimented ways of doing the same research. To do this, historical reflection on these disciplinary sedimentations can help rearticulate the contexts of intercultural communication.

## Recontextualizing intercultural communication

Largely based on the models of Edward T. Hall (1959), approaches to intercultural communication bear a resemblance to comparative work in multilingual writing, particularly in what is often called contrastive rhetoric — a popular mode of comparison for multilingual writing. There is a clear affinity between the work of Hall and Robert Kaplan, the originator of

[1] Both names in these case studies are subject-chosen pseudonyms. IRB Protocol ##09-461, Miami University of Ohio.

contrastive rhetoric, often cited in intercultural communication texts (Scollon et al., 2000; Scollon et al., 2011; Thatcher, 2010). Both Hall's and Kaplan's work, although not necessarily systematic, have served as important heuristics for comparison, particularly for the quantitative work of Geert Hofstede (1991). Even so, examining some of the methodological sedimentations can help recontextualize these etic frames for current multilingual and multimodal contexts. These etic frames can be valuable to intercultural work, but only when examined as part of the comparative inquiry and adapted to these new contexts. Certainly, both works make important contributions to the intercultural conversations of their time but potentially leave sedimentations that may prove less than useful when observing the intercultural contexts of communication that differ from the ecologies in which Kaplan and Hall developed their comparative approaches.

There are several methodological sedimentations that are common between these two modes of comparative inquiry. First of all, both Kaplan and Hall relied on identifying through comparison cultural patterns that impact communication, in Hall's case, or the learning of writing, in Kaplan's case. Both approaches begin with the premise that the art of rhetoric or the study of communication involves the study of "misunderstanding and its remedies" (Richards, 1965, p. 3). Hall's (1959) focus was to find the "principle source of misunderstanding" within intercultural relations by analyzing how different cultures' views of reality clash, particularly in political and business situations (pp. 26-27). For Kaplan (1966/2001), rhetoric was not universal but "varies from culture to culture" (p. 12). Kaplan first developed contrastive rhetoric as a method of "uncovering" supra-linguistic elements that affect multilingual students in their writing — a possible solution to the "problem" of the "advanced" student who is learning to write in another language (pp. 13, 21). Both Hall and Kaplan casted intercultural contexts as problems to be solved, rather than generative moments of dialogue and change — moments when our modes of thinking can be challenged and our comparative frameworks made more expansive. This focus on misunderstanding can be attributed, at least in part, to the contexts in which these models were originally developed, many of which do not necessarily represent today's intercultural contexts.

Additionally, both Hall and Kaplan framed their methodologies within a particular set of power dynamics, while also tying their comparative observations to national and distinct notions of culture and language. For Kaplan, contrastive rhetoric was applied specifically in situations where English teachers, presumably native speakers, are confronting learning difficulties of students from other language and cultural backgrounds. Because of the instructor's unfamiliarity with how the home cultures influence multilingual writing, the acquisition of writing seems particularly recalcitrant to traditional pedagogies that do not take cultural contexts into account. Hall's book (1959) was originally deployed as a solution to ethnocentric approaches to international business and diplomacy in the mid-twentieth century, particularly where power dynamics tended to favor American businesspersons, military personnel, and politicians. Hall anecdotally argued that Americans tend to use a "heavy-handed technique in dealing with local nationals," often considering them as "underdeveloped Americans" (p. 13). Though both Hall and Kaplan made communicative claims about their comparative models. These models are often operationalized in contexts where Americans are trying to get others to *do* something, not necessarily to communicate something, whether it's a businessperson trying to close a deal or a language instructor trying to get students to acquire a kind of rhetoric or writing.

Finally, both Hall and Kaplan depended on defined and delimited notions of culture, concretizing their own versions of nationality and culture as macrosocial units. For Hall (1959), part of the problem had been the inability to agree on "what the precise substance of culture is" or the "sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things" (p. 44). As Bruno Latour (2005) has often critiqued, this assumes that culture is a thing, rather than a set of relationships. Hall (1959) attempted to recast his theory of culture as communication, using biology as a metaphor for identifying this substance or "the constant elemental units of culture" (p. 48). By establishing this biological base, Hall was establishing an etic framework from which to cast his comparisons with a list of isolates that are the building blocks of all cultures, though they vary in how they are put together in sets and patterns (p. 50). Even so, these isolates were developed within a Western science model that is ultimately culturally bound in its own way, defining culture and language instrumentally rather than relationally. For example, Hall structured his observations in each of the categories based on an instrumental view of language, where language is a system of signs that transcribes perceptions of reality. Culture as a communication system has three aspects: "its over-all components, comparable to switchboards, wires, and telephones; and the message itself, which is carried by the network" (1959, p. 122). One can break down messages (and thus culture) into sets (words), isolates (sounds), and patterns (syntax) (Hall, 1959, p. 122). The goal of intercultural communication is to identify the disparate ways of putting these elements together, which ultimately lead to miscommunication or conflict. In other words, the isolates or building blocks are the same everywhere; it is how different cultures put them together that creates different ways of communicating. Though Kaplan (1966/2001) made no real attempt to define culture, his focus is clearly on rhetoric, which he defined as logic (in what he called the "popular" sense of the word) (p. 12). Roughly speaking, this sense of logic simply implies the ways different cultures put things together, giving rise to Kaplan's "thought patterns," otherwise known as Kaplan's doodles. Both Hall and Kaplan relied on metaphors to construct their etic frames — metaphors that are ultimately culturally bound.

The work of Geert Hofstede (1991) is the most extensive attempt to quantitatively validate Hall's work (and to some degree Kaplan's). Similar to Hall and Kaplan, the goal of Hofstede's book (1991) is to deal with the problem of confrontation in intercultural settings or to "to help in dealing with the differences in thinking, feeling, and acting of people around the globe" (p. 4). Hofstede (1991) used the metaphor of a computer program instead of biological isolates or doodles, defining cultural patterns as "mental programs" or the "software of the mind," though he was careful to note that these patterns only refer to what is likely to happen in a given circumstance—not a constant determination (p. 4). By using this metaphor, Hofstede (1991) was locating culture in the mind, rather than in environments, but still relied on unquestioned macrosocial units, making comparison easier, because "it is the *collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another* [italics in original]" (p. 5). Hofstede's primary example in his introduction is about a jury confrontation between a European watchmaker who is overly polite and an American garageman "from the slums" who is not polite at all. This requires researchers to ignore or miss categories other than nationality, ethnicity, or class, as well as how such categories are formed. There is the danger of attributing to “culture” or “nation” what is ultimately a performance influenced by a number of factors that may not be easily connected to pre-conceived social entities.

Hofstede (1991) relied primarily on national categories of analysis, though he identified several other cultural layers which are distinct from personal and broadly human forms of “mental programming”: (1) national, (2) regional, (3) gender, (4) generational, (5) class, and (6) organizational (p. 10). But he primarily focused on cultural models based on the nation because his participants were all employees of IBM, “similar in all respects except nationality” (p. 13). From a quantitative perspective, the national level is easiest because much of this data has already been collected by national organizations, institutions, and governments. For Hofstede (1991), the primary reason for using nation as a category was to “promote cooperation among nations” (p. 12). Though coming to terms with the nation as a unit of analysis is somewhat necessary in intercultural communication, there are several problems with this approach. First, researchers are dependent on how these organizational networks themselves define the nation or even the variable under study. There is also the danger of reconstituting notions of culture and nation that are hegemonic and exclude groups of people or practices that do not necessarily fit these schemas. The result is that researchers are not just studying or observing cultures, they are building conceptions of culture, often excluding linguistic or user variation that may be equally useful in intercultural communication contexts.

In web environments, students or users may develop different methods of use or design, especially in Web 2.0 environments, that may or may not be tied to the “mental programming” of a particular group. Take user templates as an example, most of which tend to be developed for deductive structures.

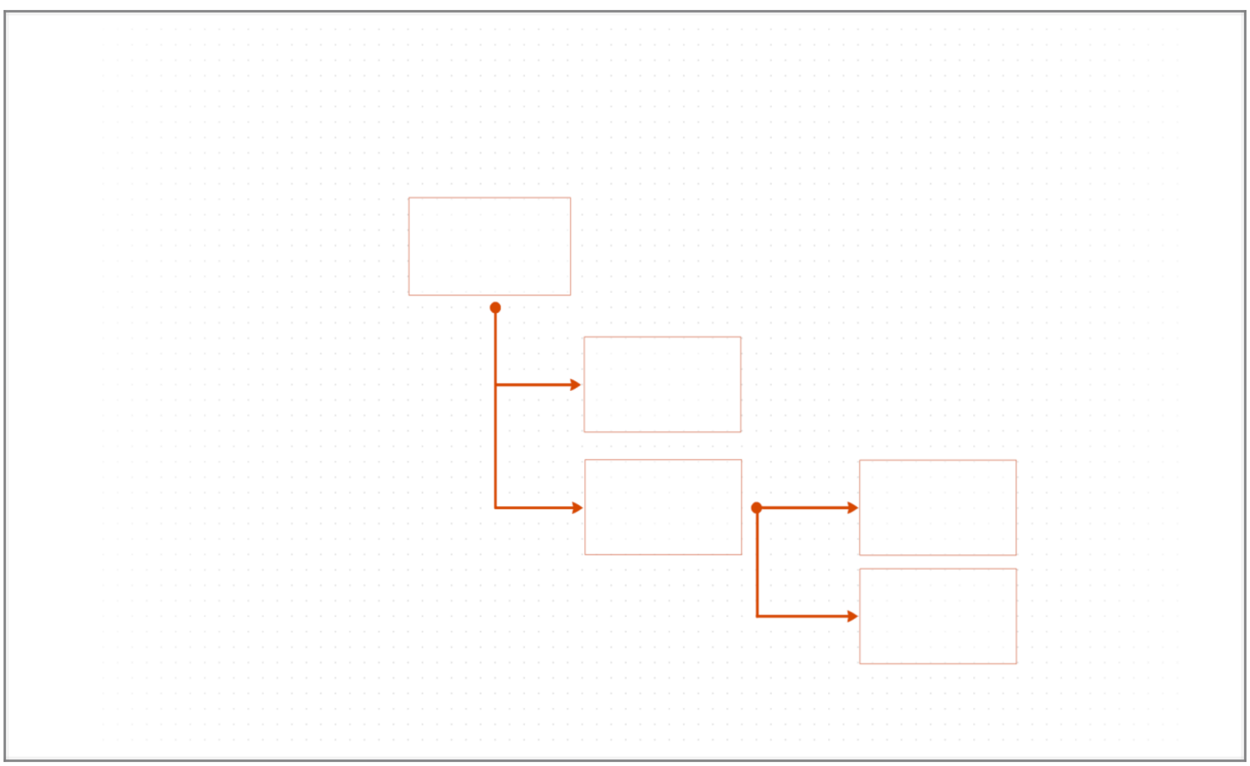

*Figure 2.* Prezi Designed Template

Though the template from Prezi in Figure 2 strongly suggests a deductive structure, such a template can be used in different ways or rearranged, just as grammar or discourse can be used in different englishes. Prezi also allows users to organize information in ways that do not fit an inductive/deductive paradigm.


*Figure 3.* User Template Based on Spatial Metaphors

For example, Prezis are often structured through metaphor, location, or even just by shape (see Figure 3). Etic frames developed around more static forms of communication and culture need to be adapted by close qualitative study of these participatory environments. When these technologies are used in conjunction with more traditionally written texts, variation in organization, rhetoric, or logic may be more clearly present. Writers are not influenced by just culture (group thinking or “mental software”) but also by the technologies and use available to them in specific contexts. In Latour’s (2005) terms, there are other powerful actors in these networks that often reproduce, contest, or transform hegemonic notions of nationality and culture.

According to Sun (2012), all three predominant approaches to analyzing and adapting to local cultures rely on truncated definitions of culture because of their “instrumental orientations,” ignoring how technology and users themselves participate in the creation of culture (p. 24). In fact, any conception of culture is necessarily truncated because that is the nature of metaphors — the primary method researchers use for describing or defining culture. Sun (2012) attempted to shift our definition of culture from object-oriented to action-oriented, by proposing her own metaphor of a nexus, viewing culture as dialogical or both “*a site of the dynamic, ever-changing nexus of contextual interactions, and an assemblage of myriad articulations as a semantic space consisting of meanings and practices* [italics in original]” (p. 26). Intercultural spaces must be seen as an ecology or networked space, where both culture and technology are in the state of becoming, not static. In some ways, it makes sense how Kaplan, Hall, and Hofstede's work can be translated into several different models of web design or communication by viewing these interactions as an extension of Western economics or diplomacy into the peripheries and localities of globalization — or in language terms, the dominance of inner circle speakers of English over outer circle speakers of English (Kachru, 1990). In both cases, the goal is to calibrate the user, whether of language or the web, to the goals of the developer or teacher, rather than to actually create communicative interaction. In short, this kind of comparative analysis assumes that (1) culture is a fairly static entity, usually based on the nation, that (2) exerts a unidirectional influence on users that (3) occurs within a self-contained relational space (whether it be a classroom or website). But in the rapidly changing ecologies of the twenty-first century, where cultural boundaries are not clear and are often changing at rapid rates, comparative models based on these three sedimentations can hide more than they reveal.

## Conclusion: The multilingual classroom and online spaces

Presumably, cultural comparisons should inform how classroom pedagogies impact student learning or how web users effectively use a web site. But these comparative approaches often do not consider the sedimented etic frames that can hide the variations that might recontextualize our own comparisons. As writing classrooms and intercultural communication move into hybridized or online spaces, using emic and local perspectives to problematize and contest these etic frames can help recontextualize the macrosocial units they sediment. There is always the danger of examining online spaces as texts, rather than interactive spaces that are ultimately embodied in unique ways, making it easy to rely too heavily on sedimented macrosocial units. The teaching of English, as well as communication models used in professional and technical contexts, are still very much tied to notions of the nation and language as discrete units, which can sometimes be at odds with users and learners. In *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism*, Suresh Canagarajah (1999) pointed out the disjunctures between language-learning materials in India and the learners themselves, examining instances where students critiqued and resisted these discourses, for example by doodling in textbooks. Additionally, as new web technologies are being introduced at a faster pace, the discursive options available to students and professionals are increasing, particularly as we come into contact with other patterns of use, increasing the potential for variation. Intentional and reflective approaches to comparison can recontextualize these sedimented approaches if rearticulated as a mode of inquiry, regardless of methodology (quantitative, qualitative, global, local, or otherwise).

Using research from emic perspectives that purposely targets potential sedimentations can help reformulate more quantitative work. For example, students come to both online spaces and the multilingual classroom with different forms of tacit knowledge about language and web use. Funke, my second interviewee from Niger in the aforementioned case studies, has a complicated background in English that does not necessarily fit into a monolingual, or even a bilingual, frame. She speaks fluent pidgin English, which is never written, except now sometimes in texting. She knows two other languages but finds it much easier to write in English, though she often sees her English as "impure." Throughout parts of the interview, Funke made it clear that she does not draw on any of her experiences from her home country to contribute to her writing or even her technology use (having come from a region with little access to web technologies).

But she does find herself relying on knowledge from within different englishes, though her professor does not allow her to do so. The one moment when she does draw on her language experience in Niger, the professor dismissed it as error:

> Then I think for this one capitalization of South Eastern Nigeria or West Africa. It is kind of argument between me and my instructor. I know back there in Africa. If I want to write Western Nigeria or West Africa, I must capitalize the W of west. But here, he is telling me, it is not internationally recognized this that . . . I don't want to argue him, but if I show my advisor, he would argue with him.

Instead of exploring the rhetorical implications, this particular variance is placed within an etic frame that valorizes standardized notions of English, even though Funke's emic frame sees this variance differently. Will, my Chinese interviewee, would see this kind of variance in similar terms as the instructor, because he usually approaches Chinese and English through a bilingual frame that generally assumes languages (and cultures) as discrete and uniform systems. For example, Will has both a Chinese and English name that he uses for each particular context. Whereas Will is likely to view such a comment within his attempts to write in the "English way" to his audience, Funke's point of view is already grounded in an English way. This kind of variance does not fit into the typical comparative frame, even though examining how world englishes are used in professional or web contexts can be productive. Though not a part of the original case study, examining how these assumptions influence student interaction with web environments can be an important way to understand how linguistic and cultural diversity affects usability in more complex and nuanced ways. For example, Will had vast experience navigating technological environments in many different contexts, including China, Singapore, and the US, whereas Funke had almost no exposure to web environments in her home country. These experiences likely correlate in unique ways to experiences with different englishes and language ideologies.

Much of the work on website analysis in intercultural communication has assumed a unidirectional approach, where texts as cultural artifacts represent a dominant cultural pattern tied to discrete ideas of the nation. In an analysis of academic websites across cultures, Thatcher used Hofstede's five variables to test their validity in these cross-cultural contexts, showing that these websites generally "reflected the cultural values attributed to that local culture by intercultural research" (Thatcher, 2007, p. 141). For example, U.S. websites tended to take more universal approaches to web structure, relying on uniformity and direct instructions to guide the reader throughout the website, whereas other countries tended to take more particular approaches, designing pages and instructions for particular sets of readers, rather than a general audience. Though certainly a useful study, further research should look into both developer and user perspectives on these websites. For example, do the web developers perceive these websites in the same way? Could there be a category that is not captured by the universal/particular binary? How do different users interact with each type of these websites? Just like Will and Funke interact differently with instructor notions of English, they most likely would interact differently in each of these contexts. Does this interaction necessarily cause communicative or user errors? Or are users able to adapt or "code-switch" between these types of structures? All of these questions could be explored in qualitative, more emic approaches (and later validated quantitatively) but only within a dialogical relationship that can subject these etic frames to such questions. Though understanding these spaces in relation to etic frames set up by researchers like Hall, Kaplan, and Hofstede can help understand variation in use when teaching a class or communicating professionally, doing so through a sedimented lens can inhibit our ability to adapt our research and rhetorical understanding of these spaces.

The goal of comparative work should be to develop methodologies that make these constantly moving networks more visible — not just between foci of comparison, but within the performative and situated act of comparison itself. Reflecting on the contexts of comparison is essential for operationalizing comparative methodologies in intercultural contexts, particularly as many of these contexts and networks begin to shift online, whether in hybridized classrooms or completely online learning spaces. Habits of thought and analysis that have layered themselves into modes of comparative inquiry may no longer match these shifting ecologies. Just as definitions of culture and technology can be overly instrumental, so also can notions of language use in the multilingual language learning and writing classroom. One goal of operationalizing sedimentation is to flatten these macrosocial units into relational networks that can create more intentional and reflective approaches to comparison. In a way, we can re-cast Hall's and Kaplan's work as observing dominant sedimentations, or repetitive performances, in those specific contexts. But as communicative and cultural contexts allow for more and more agency, where remix and the contesting of norms and patterns is made more possible, students and professionals may be unsedimenting their own view of communication in online spaces, even if researchers are not.

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