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A Review of *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing and Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*

Judith Kilborn

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Helen Fox. *Listening to the World: Cultural Issues in Academic Writing*. Urbana: NCTE, 1994.

Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester. *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.

Two recent books deal directly with the challenges of global change and the increasing frequency of intercultural encounters in our institutions and in our daily lives. *Listening to the World* and *Intercultural Competence* address powerful changes occurring in the academic contexts we inhabit; these books can assist us as we teach, direct writing centers, and tutor an increasingly multicultural clientele. Both books intermingle theory with practice and address similar diversity issues; however, the writers' backgrounds and specialties as well as their audiences and primary purposes are dissimilar. These differences make the books nice companion pieces for training graduate and advanced undergraduate writing center tutors and, I would argue, required reading for writing center directors.

Helen Fox, author of *Listening to the World*, has lived and taught in various cultures and contexts. She has taught one-to-one and in the classroom for the Center for International Education at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, where she developed and taught graduate-level writing courses for international and U.S. students, and has worked in conferences with those writing masters theses and doctoral dissertations.

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Fox's research, including the powerful stories she shares in her book, originated in this context. While at the Center for International Education, Fox also directed cultural and language programs for international graduate students and scholars and trained U.S. business representatives to work more sensitively and productively in cultures overseas. Additional overseas experiences include Fox's work in the Peace Corps (training science teachers and volunteers in West Africa and the South Pacific) and teaching French-speaking adults in rural Quebec. In other words, Fox's book emerges from many years of truly "listening to the world" and learning from its people.

The experiential and academic backgrounds of Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester, co-authors of *Intercultural Competence*, are quite different from Fox's. Both live and teach in California, which between 1980 and 1990 experienced an increase of 1.5 million in its Asian population and 3.1 million in its Latino population and is now 43 percent "nonwhite" (9). Therefore, Lustig and Koester have significant experience in dealing day to day with a diverse environment—both within and outside the classroom. They draw heavily upon this experience for their "ideas and examples about intercultural communication" yet "increase the number and range of other cultural voices" through the "lessons and illustrations" gleaned from colleagues, friends, and students (xvi). Lustig and Koester also differ from Fox in their academic backgrounds. While Fox's interest is in the effects of cultural "assumptions and habits of thinking" on writing primarily and interpersonal communication secondarily (*Listening to the World* xxi), Lustig and Koester's expertise is intercultural communication; they cover oral and nonverbal communication extensively, and writing is addressed only peripherally. Nevertheless, since interpersonal communication is what writing centers do, and since we strive to train our tutors to be good oral and nonverbal communicators, Lustig and Koester's expertise is a valuable addition to our resources. This is particularly true given the resonance between their general communication theory and writing center perspectives: communication is, they say, "a symbolic, interpretive, transactional, contextual process in which people create shared meanings" (48).

Given the differences in the academic and experiential backgrounds of these authors, it should come as no surprise that their intended readers and purposes differ too. Lustig and Koester are writing for students taking course work in intercultural communication, and their book is, in fact, a textbook. Lustig and Koester are aware of the enormous changes in the world's cultural coalitions and alliances, in economic relationships among people, in patterns of travel and migration, in communications technology, and in shifting demographics in the classroom and the workplace; and they are sensitive to the fragile interdependencies among cultures both within and outside the United States. The authors' intent in writing *Intercultural Competence* is to prepare undergraduate students to deal with an increasingly "global village,"

and their direct address to readers in their Concluding Remarks explicitly indicates this intent:

We urge you to view this book and each intercultural experience as steps in a lifelong commitment to competence in intercultural communication. Intercultural competence is, in many ways, an art rather than a science. Our hope is that you will use your artistic talents to make the world a better place in which people from all cultures can live and thrive. (319)

Fox would agree that positive intercultural interactions require more art than science. Despite the fact that *Listening to the World* is firmly grounded in theory, the impetus for this book comes from Fox's strong conviction that multicultural programs in higher education are not as successful as they might be because of over-reliance on scientific approaches.

[M]any universities have set—and reached—ambitious goals for diversity that have made their student bodies and academic offerings more representative of the world's cultures. But despite these admirable changes, multiculturalism in the university has been limited for the most part to theoretical understanding, a mastery of facts and theories and major ideas, *knowledge about* difference rather than a real *feeling for* what it is to make sense of the world and communicate it in totally different ways. (ix-x, emphasis in original)

Fox's book is, to a large degree, a demonstration of the complexity and art of intercultural communication within the educational system. Like Mike Rose's *Lives on the Boundary* in its interweaving of compelling stories of Fox's work with students and faculty, *Listening to the World* is meant to make readers *feel* the differences of radically different perceptions of teaching, learning, communicating, and understanding the world so that teachers in the classroom and in conferences can truly begin to listen to students and hear and respond sensitively to differences.

These differences, learned from early childhood, affect the way students interact with their professors and classmates, their attitudes toward the books they read, and the problems they are called upon to solve. They affect how students give oral presentations, from short critiques of articles they've read to dissertation defenses. They affect how students understand assignments, how they study, and how they comment on their classmates' papers. But most of all, these differences affect the way they write. For writing touches the heart of a student's identity, drawing its voice and strength and meaning from the way the student understands the world. (v)

Fox addresses her argument to college and university faculty who wish to "encourage a deeper, more meaningful multiculturalism," a multiculturalism

not unlike that described by Lustig and Koester. However, while Lustig and Koester attempt to move students into a deeper appreciation for and understanding of other cultures as well as to prepare them to work and live in a more global environment, Fox intends to make those of us who work with students feel the need for change: change in the ways we interact with students, react to their writing, and value their voices; systemic changes—in our classroom and conference methods, in our conceptions of academic writing, in our views of the world. Fox conceives of these changes as a broadening of our perspective that can enrich our intellectual lives; Lustig and Koester conceive of intercultural communication competence as an expansion of our interpersonal communication repertoire that can challenge and excite us. Both perspectives can contribute to our classrooms, writing centers, and lives outside of academia as we move toward the educational and workplace environments of the next century.

*Intercultural Competence* is divided in four parts. Part One provides Lustig and Koester's theoretical underpinnings for communication and intercultural competence. The authors neatly argue international and domestic imperatives for intercultural competence, citing persuasive statistics demonstrating the political and economic interdependencies among the U. S. and other countries and the truly multicultural nature of the workplace and higher education. The authors also define types of intercultural communication encounters and describe the United States as an intercultural community. Of particular value to writing center readers, especially tutors-in-training, is the discussion of metaphors of U.S. cultural diversity, which Lustig and Koester show have underlying assumptions that need exploration. Also of value is their analysis of terms used to "label" cultural groups. What do we as U.S. citizens call ourselves? (The authors' preference is U.S. Americans.) What do we call cultural groups within the United States? Do we call residents of the United States whose surname is Spanish "Hispanic"? Latino? Chicano? Mexican-American? Lustig and Koester argue the extreme urgency of finding "ways to refer to these cultures with terms that accurately express their differences but avoid unwanted negative connotations and evaluations" (20). (Fox might want to read this discussion since the only indication of insensitivity I saw in her book was a brief mention of "Hispanics." My Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Costa Rican students have taught me the pain this colonial label brings them.) Finally, I find Lustig and Koester's boxed "Culture Connections," begun in this chapter and interspersed consistently throughout the text, an effective way of enabling a variety of voices to speak. These quotations—from multicultural fiction, nonfiction accounts of those working and living overseas, student writing, popular print media, and more specialized academic publications—provide not only a wealth of perspectives on intercultural communication but also grist for lively classroom and writing center discussion.

The rest of Part One defines characteristics and discusses models of interpersonal communication and culture, as well as providing examples of intercultural interactions, definitions of intercultural communication and related terms, and the components of intercultural communication competence. The discussion is thoughtfully and sensitively presented, and competing models are carefully distinguished. Of particular interest for classroom and tutor-training applications are the examples of intercultural interactions, accompanied by guiding questions which surface assumptions about the meanings of *intercultural* and *communication* and provide an effective backdrop for the authors' discussion of similarities and differences among communicators as well as effects of differences.

Part Two focuses on why cultures differ, the foundations of cultural patterns (beliefs, values, and norms), and cultural patterns and communication taxonomies, including Stewart's work on activity orientation, social relations orientation, self-orientation, and world orientation; Hall's taxonomy of high- and low-context cultures (covert and overt messages, ingroups and outgroups, and orientation to time); and Hofstede's cultural patterns (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and individualism-collectivism). My tutors have found Lustig and Koester's discussion of these taxonomies clear, informative, and very useful in helping them unpack their intercultural conversations with students and in knowing how to more effectively interpret future tutorial conversations.

Part Three focuses on verbal and nonverbal intercultural communication: verbal codes and intercultural competence, the effects of body movements, space, touch, time, voice, and other types of nonverbal messages. This section also provides information about preferences in the organization of verbal codes and cultural variations in persuasion and in the structure of conversations, including the value of talk and silence and the rules for conversation.

Part Four covers cultural variations in interpersonal relationships, strategies for improving intercultural relationships, and obstacles to intercultural competence: ethnocentrism, stereotyping, prejudice, racism, lack of knowledge, motivation, and skill, as well as intercultural contact, incompatible goals, and culture shock or cultural adjustment. The authors also raise serious issues concerning the ethics underlying intercultural competence. Tutors-in-training and writing center directors will find these issues lively topics for discussion and the book very informative about intercultural communication as a whole.

Readers will find Fox's *Listening to the World* theoretically less cumbersome than *Intercultural Competence* but no less theoretically sound. Fox's introduction provides—in a refreshingly accessible voice—the purposes, assumptions, and methodology for her research into “nonwestern” students' writing. Her book is based upon her own experiences and observations;

ongoing, informal conversations with international and naturalized students deeply influenced by communication styles different from the European and American mainstream; and in-depth interviews with professors who have extensive experience working with international graduate students. This research and a thorough knowledge of significant, secondary sources provide the theoretical underpinnings for the author's stories of students' frustrations with academic writing and an educational system based on different cultural values, norms, beliefs, and practices. Writing center directors wishing to use Fox's book for tutor training might need to supplement it with the theories and writing samples provided by Robert Kaplan and other contrastive rhetoricians since Fox assumes a knowledge of these sources tutors-in-training are unlikely to have.

Chapter One of *Listening to the World* focuses on the frustrations of students Fox has had the luxury of seeing "one by one." Fox says these are students who

want to learn what the university expects of them; they are accustomed to doing well in their home countries, and they want to continue to excel. But reaching them is not always easy, even when we are well meaning and knowledgeable. Students are resisting, and we react, sometimes, with exasperation, for we may underestimate how difficult it is for them to change not only their writing style, but the way they think about themselves and the world. And because of our country's long history of ethnocentrism and racism, students may be insulted when we bring up the subject of "difference," for which they read "deficiency." We have to tread carefully. But we do have to understand. (10)

Chapter Two, "Worldwide Strategies for Indirection," elaborates upon "linguistic, rhetorical, poetic, and psychological" differences in writing which "create a richness that to world majority students makes the spare, relentless logic of the Western tradition seem meager in comparison" (21). The chapter also includes information on why writers who are skilled and experienced when writing in their first language are often evaluated by faculty as "inexperienced" or "basic," why their interactions with professors sometimes are perceived as irritating, how cultural differences in audience expectation impact on writing, the political exigencies of some students' indirectness, the effects of Confucianism, and the holistic nature of high-context cultures.

Chapter Three, "'In Solidarity': The Voice of the Collectivity," provides an overview of collectivism, which sheds light on students' difficulty with using and citing sources and affects their notions about evidence. International graduate students' difficulty with academic writing, including theses and dissertations, is further elaborated upon in Chapter Four, "What Is

Ancient Is Also Original.”

Chapters Five and Six, “Something Inside Is Saying No” and “Stigma and Resistance,” document in compelling terms both students’ feelings about being asked to change the way they write and the sources of those feelings. Fox elaborates upon these sources—a complex intermingling of academic and personal backgrounds which are cultural, contextual, and individual in nature—with sensitivity and clarity.

Chapter Seven, “Helping World Majority Students Make Sense of University Expectations,” provides concrete advice about “When to Talk to World Majority Students about Cultural Differences,” “Making the Main Point Clear,” “Digressive or ‘Irrelevant’ Material,” “Compare and Contrast,” “Critiquing Authorities,” “Plagiarism,” and “‘Analysis’ or ‘Critical Thinking.’” *Listening to the World* ends with a powerful story showing the gap between faculty perceptions of an international graduate student and who she actually is. Fox has truly provided *knowledge about* as well as *feeling for* different cultural perspectives and communication preferences.

Fox, Lustig, and Koester provide coherent theoretical backgrounds and pedagogical strategies that can enable those of us interested in orchestrating learning in a multicultural setting to do so in informed and powerful ways. However, as Fox demonstrates that attending to a diverse student population requires “art” as well as “science,” and as she blends sound theory with powerful stories, she makes a compelling and cogent argument for the power of “listening to the world.” The focus of *Listening to the World* is more readily relevant to a writing center audience than is *Intercultural Competence: Interpersonal Communication Across Cultures*. Such an audience will undoubtedly appreciate Fox’s seemingly effortless blending of theory and story; Fox’s voice is also more engaging and forceful than are the often too separate and distinct collaborative voices of Lustig and Koester. Nevertheless, both books are important multicultural resources that should become part of our writing center libraries.

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