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Journal Compilation

English 5328

Journal #1

Defining and understanding risk communication and intercultural rhetoric proved to be a difficult task during week 1. When trying to define risk communication and intercultural rhetoric my classmates all had different definitions. Intercultural rhetoric and communication were terms we felt comfortable with, whether we had a complete definition or not, but it was the word risk that gave us trouble. For me I wasn’t sure how to use risk, because I did not know what was meant by its use. Did it refer to the danger involved in not communicating effectively, or did address the potential slippery slope of communicating and addressing intercultural rhetoric? Through class discussion and assigned readings it became clear to me that it would be easier to recognize instances of this type of communication and rhetoric in action, than it would be to define it. This certainly was the case with the “Naming Migraine and Those Who Have It” article.

In the Segal et al article it is clear that careful and deliberate consideration must be given when naming and categorizing a migraine, and those that encounter them. The trouble I had writing that sentence is a result of reading the article. I didn’t want to write people suffering from, or with migraines. I, as a writer of this journal didn’t feel I had the power to describe that event in such a way. Even then I hesitated to use event, when I could have used condition, but after reading the article I find myself more concerned with what is in a name, and what each word may or may not imply. As someone studying rhetoric, this is not new, but the arena of risk communication and intercultural rhetoric is a different from what I’m accustomed. There was a lot of discussion, and a bit of tension in the Segal et al piece. The comfort of those in the group trying to name and correctly categorize migraines would change depending on the term they discussed. This isn’t something I know first hand, but their responses indicate the seriousness behind their task. If something, like disorder for example, sounded “psychiatric” then it would lose favor amongst the group. This gives insight as to how one term can be perceived to be associated with other medical terms and diagnoses that are not viewed in a positive light. In class we discussed the continued stigma of mental illness. The reasons for accepting and denying certain terms are based on the terms and their understandings/perceptions of them. Disease was deemed too serious, or that a migraine might not be credible enough as a disease. The issue of accurately describing an event, or medical condition comes up again in The Aggressive Egg.

In The Aggressive Egg readers understand that point of view when describing an event matters. This is not new, but seeing it in science, which tends to be believed as objective and based on fact is quite different. In fact in this piece we see the ways a point of view can uphold gender roles/stereotypes, and/or be influenced by them. I’ve read this many times before, and always in different classes for different purposes, but the message of the point of view shaping our understanding, and what is acceptable as a description of the same, or similar, events remains. These readings help me to understand that the definitions of risk communication and intercultural rhetoric will not be easy to pin down, but that isn’t as important as recognizing it in action.

Journal #2  
September 8th, 2015

In class on Monday 8/31 we went around the room and each student read their journal entry. Most read the entire entry, while some picked out paragraphs they felt were important. This exercise caused me some anxiety, because it is not easy to read aloud your work. Ultimately, I found that it was an incredibly helpful thing to do in class for many reasons. The biggest value I see in reading our journal entries out loud is that it gives us time to listen to each other. I wanted to take notes, and really use what other people thought about the previous week’s readings, but in the end I found that listening to everyone speak was more helpful to me than taking notes. I didn’t want to be distracted. The act of writing the journal entry is also incredibly beneficial. I have to really focus on what we did the previous week, and despite the fact that we don’t have exams in this class it’s still very important to remember specifics about what we’ve done. As the semester rolls on it’s important to reflect on not only what we’ve read and discussed, but how the concepts of each reading build on each other.

The Beck reading for last week wasn’t particularly difficult to get through, but I find myself still having confusion over the concept of risk society. I understand that Beck views risk as a “mediating issue in terms of the division of labor between science, politics, and the economy in highly innovative societies (p.6).” but I’m not sure how that relates to risk as a consequence of the success of modernization. Does he mean that because of decisions related to growth as dictated by modernization and, possibly urbanization, new or different risks are encountered that previous societies did not encounter?

In week 1 I stumbled about with the concept of risk in risk communication. In a previous journal entry I stated that I could better identify examples of risk communication than I could define it. After reading Beck I have a much better understanding of risk. “Risks concern the possibility of future occurrences and developments,” so risk is anticipation. It seems there is an inherent tension when discussing risk, which is either due to the heightened attention to the word risk, or simply the potential for an event that will have a big impact. Risk is a possibility, and events that may or may not occur, but because of their potential impact communication and awareness about the potential for risk is vital.

I particularly enjoyed the chapters being divided amongst pairs of students. It helped me to understand the chapters better, but it also kept me from feeling like I have to talk about each chapter in class. I think the group that had Chapter 2 did a great job at explaining the power and importance of definition. The power that comes with defining something will impact how it is communicated and thought of moving forward.

Journal 3

September 13, 2015

Last week in class we dove into the world of risk society and some of the very important concepts discussed in Beck’s book, “Risk Society.” We discussed some of the key concepts in class by breaking up the chapters and assigning them to pairs.

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Another important concept was that of ambivalence. The danger, as I understand it, of ambivalence is in understanding the risk and the implications of any danger associated with risk, but believing it to be unstoppable. This acceptance of suck risk, or risky events, leads to non action. Non action is dangerous not only because it may lead to the very event that is seen as inevitable. My point here is that non action is not an appropriate response.

My group worked on chapter 3, which was challenging. The key concepts of chapter 3 revolve around understanding ambivalence. Ambivalence is the difference between new and old threats. You can’t treat new threats as you did old threats. You also can’t be ambivalent to threats, or risk. All actions must confront risk.

World risk is unwanted, because the result is the new cosmopolitan that will overcome boundaries. It will force countries, etc. people to talk and interact that would not normally do so. This is unwanted because it challenges or questions the normative behavior of these countries, people, etc.

The important concept discussed in Beck’s book that I struggled with the most was new cosmopolitan. When reading Beck on my own I wasn’t sure of how to approach this concept. Throughout discussion in class I came to understand it as the overcoming of boundaries by only judging something against the alternatives. You don’t judge against past solutions or approaches. Stay in the moment, and address risk against current alternatives. The new cosmopolitan will overcome boundaries.

The concept I was most interested in was that of definition and power. I think we like to view risk as something big, the catastrophe, etc., but it exists in everything, and we see that easily in definition and power. When an event happens, who dictates the narrative, and who reinforces the narrative by repeating it or reporting it again?

Journal 4

On Monday September 14th Dr. Dura asked us to think about the gap between theory and action. If we believed there was a gap between the two, then we were to discuss the ways in which we can bridge the gap, while also addressing what creates and causes that gap to exist. However, instead of writing out our answers, or discussing them with the class we were given markers and paper to draw out our answers. The difficulty of this task was finding a way to draw, create, and arrange images in a way that would convey our thoughts.

I do believe that a gap exists between theory and action. The gap is the result of several factors. My drawing consisted of a wall that represents all the obstacles that we face when trying to move from theory to action. To put it simply, I think that theories are the ideas, and action is what we want to do with them. The importance of this activity is not in drawing images that convey my thoughts on what creates the gap between theory and activity, but in learning how to approach a situation and communicate in a way I’m not accustomed. Communicating risk as we’ve discussed in class is not easy. There are many factors that limit our ability to effectively communicate risk. We can’t approach a situation as though we can easily communicate our point, and to an audience that will understand us. That is to say, we can’t approach these types of situations assuming that our audience, those we want to discuss a risk with, will understand us. We can’t take for granted what we know, and that any/all communication practice will be universal. Interestingly enough, we probably should not think that our audience would be unable to understand us.

It was not all that surprising that all in the class believe there is a gap between theory and action. Over and over again I saw that the class viewed theory as “high” and action as “low.” The top/down model and/or approach was not surprising. We are part of an institution that, despite its rankings in social mobility, still favors those with access. Of course, in classes such as this one, and others in RWS, we are able to critically think about our position. What does it mean? What can we do with it? Are we supposed to do something? Or educate and help others do?

I found myself thinking a lot about the gap between theory and action, but not just what creates it, and keeps it wide. Rather, I thought a lot about my own role in the gap. What side of that picture do I situate myself on? I’d like to think that what I’m doing, by taking this class and engaging myself with the concepts of risk and risk communication, but what if I don’t move myself over to the action side of the spectrum? Personally, I think about this often, and how to approach these issues when it’s a high possibility that my work will place me on the theory side more than it will the action side.

Journal 5

Last week we discussed the final chapters of Beck’s book. Jasmine and I wrote up some notes, and key points from Chapter 9. While listening to Erikk’s artifact I quickly realized how easy it is to analyze the podcast, and the events it describes under the lens of Beck’s work. In chapter 9 Beck views “risk is an inescapable structural condition of reflexive modernization” (p.142). Risk society may be the most succinct way to describe society in the U.S.

Much of our news and news stories are preoccupied with the potential of risk. Our society is preoccupied with the potential of risk, and not the events or powers that define what we understand as risk, and enforce the staging of that risk. As a society we tend to be less focused with the ways in which risk is socially constructed, and staged, rather we are more concerned with the possible outcomes. We prepare for the worst, often times, without asking what creates these situations and who in power defines the situations as risky.

This is evident in the podcast Erikk brought to class last week. In it there is a description not of the events that took place on 9/11, but rather the focus is on what happened the day after the attacks. The debate of how to declare war without knowing who to declare war on, and how to project unity nation is presented. What we are listening to in this clip are the ways in which the stage is being set to declare war in a way that promotes unity, and supports the cause. The call to action is not dictated necessarily by what happened, but that if the country does nothing, it would certainly happen again, which we can recognize as weighing action against the alternative. The staging of risk is now complete. The U.S. is able to use its power and domination to declare war, and those are two key characteristics that Beck discusses in Chapter 9.

When discussing previous chapters of Beck’s book we addressed the issue of differentiating between new and old threats. Specifically, as a class we discussed that new threats cannot be treated or dealt with the way old threats were. Therefore when the lawyer mentioned in the artifact goes back to the 1991 Iraq war to write the Authorization to Use Force he is approaching this new threat the same way a perceived previous threat was, and that of course does not bring up new solutions. The management of crisis. and always weighing against the alternative.

Journal #6

Reading Douglas proved to be a difficult task. I found that before I could really engage with the text I had to remind myself that it was written when primitive wasn’t a negative adjective. However, the more I read the book the more difficult it became to swallow that term. Moving on from that discussion, which is something I’m sure will be addressed in class. There is a lot to think about after reading the first few chapters of the Douglas book. Primarily, I found myself most concerned with clean and unclean, or pure/impure. On pg. 9 Douglas writes “what is clean in relations to one thing may be unclean in relation to another, and vice versa,” which shows the relation between what is considered clean and what is not. It’s an inverse relationship. We only know what one is, because it is either the opposite or different than what we compare it to.

Personally, I never questioned how it is that I know something is clean and/or pure, dirty and/or impure. It is something that is learned from a young age, and then ingrained in us that questioning it seems odd. It’s, in my opinion, something of an absolute. The influence of religion and religious beliefs is evident in some of our understanding of what is and isn’t clean/pure. In chapter 3 there is some discussion by Douglas on defilement. “Defilement is never an isolated event. It cannot occur except in view of a systematic ordering of ideas,” (p. 42) which I understood to essentially mean that there is an entire system behind what is, or isn’t dirty/clean, pure/impure. This led me to think about the system behind the beliefs that influence our ideas of clean/dirty, and pure/impure. What I found most interesting is that there is something to be gained by us when we are all in agreement about what is, or is not clean/dirty, and pure/impure. There is a validation in finding another group, or groups that share our same beliefs. It seems to me that we seek out that validation, and so finding others that share our beliefs about what is and is not clean/dirty, and pure/impure is a vital part of our existence. This validation, I think, extends itself beyond the realm of clean/dirty and pure/impure, but it is no less important to actively address. Without understanding the ways in which our beliefs can influence our actions, and thought processes outside of religious practices.

Of course, this seeking out validation also equates to us feeling threatened, or at the very least uncomfortable, when encountering a group, or belief system that does not agree with our own ideas of what is pure/impure and clean/dirty. This is what has led me think about what this all means exactly. Why is it important we think about this, and read Douglas in this class? At the moment, the only connection I can make, is that it is important that we be aware of different cultural or religious practices that may be vastly different to our own. These differences may also account for social practices that seem “backwards” or “wrong” to us, but without the sensitivity or knowledge of what influences them, then we’d be likely to step all over them, which would make finding the best solution to communicate, in general or to address a risk, very difficult.

Journal #7

Last week in class each of one us were required to write one discussion question. Individually we gave each question a graded, based on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being the highest score possible. I found this to be an incredibly revealing exercise. Some of the questions were very direct, and focused, while others were longer and attempted to include as many of the main points of the book. It was clear that the class all had gone in different directions when trying to generate discussion questions. My question was short, and one I have been struggling with since beginning to read Douglas. In short, I wanted to know what value, if any, do my peers seen in reading this book in this class? I see the value, and while I grappled with some of the vocabulary used and the concepts discussed the book was thought provoking.

After selecting the top questions we were able to join a group and attempt to answer that question together. My group veered off topic a bit, but it did make sense that we couldn’t easily answer the question. We attempted to answer whether or not it was possible to address these issues of clean/dirty, and pure/impure with offending, or oppressing, someone. I may be paraphrasing the question a bit, but I know that we were working out whether or not it was possible to address oppression in a sensitive way. The discussion proved to me that before we could move forward we had to agree on what oppression meant to us, and who could decide the levels of oppression. It was clear to us that there is power in determining what is clean/unclean and dirty/impure, the same there is with what is considered oppressive and insensitive. This brought back some of what we discussed while reading Beck. It seems that the power associated with definition, and as a result I think, language continues to loom over different aspects of class discussion.

What I found most interesting from our discussion of oppression is that we all viewed it so differently when the stakes were seemingly low. We could all agree that there were levels of oppression, and the most serious was genocide. However, when discussing genocide we went back to the Holocaust, and not more recent occurrences. I have to wonder if this has anything to do with certain more recent mass killings are not as easily recognized or accepted as genocide. The low stakes examples of oppression, such as sexism, and racism, caused the most disagreement. Of course, we weren’t arguing, or disrespectful. In fact, the conversation was easy to have despite the heavy nature of the topic. We simply couldn’t reach a point where we could define, agree, and understand what we mean when we use the word oppression to answer the question. I left class wondering if we were too careful, or too aware of the riskiness of the conversation to be more open about our thoughts. I think the lack of agreement had more to do with trying to use an all encompassing term.

Journal #8

This week one of the assigned readings was Yosso “Whose Culture Has Capital?” and reading it a second time I find myself as invested, as I was when I previously read it. Yosso calls for scholars to “transform the process of theorizing” (69) in an effort to ask questions about knowledge. Specifically, whose knowledge does and does not count. This is similar to the discussions we have had in class about power and definition and the power of definition. Understanding who has the power of definition has come up numerous times when we discuss risk and situations where risk is staged. Yosso takes a slightly different approach. He uses critical race theory (CRT) as means to counteract the perceived harm done by theories that reinforce the social hierarchy. Yosso’s call to scholars is to do work that empowers and loosens theories that restrict or reaffirm. The process of doing this is theory. Essentially, the call is to fight theory with theory. There may be confusion as to how this is possible, or to what end and/or purpose, but this is at the very least an important conversation to have whether you agree or disagree with Yosso’s approach.

In this article CRT is defined as a “framework used to theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact on social structures, practices and discourses” (70). For the purpose of this class I see CRT as our framework for approaching the ways in which risk should, or could, be communicated. This is the fourth time I’ve read this article and I always find myself walking away from it with a different area of study in which I can apply some element discussed in it. For this class reading it caused me to think back about a lot of our early discussions when we grappled with how to communicate without acting as though you have the correct answers, and are the authority. It appears to me incredibly tricky to avoid the top down model of communication.

It seems to me that thinking that people are lacking in capital, and then deciding to help them the focus shifts to depositing information that the dominant social groups view as important. This urge is obviously problematic because it only values the information produced by one social group, and as I understand it Yosso, and other scholars, view this as devaluing the knowledge and capital people possess that may or may not exist outside of the generally accepted and/or valued capital. As I start to think more about my research project I wonder how it is that I can incorporate some of this line of thought in my own work. Be it on a small scale in the scope of a class project or something larger I do think it’s important to make an attempt to transform the process in the way that Yosso urges us to do.

Journal #9

Week 14  
Book Review

I presented my book review last week. I read The Public work of rhetoric  
citizen-scholars and civic engagement, which was edited by John M. Ackerman and David J. Coogan. I chose it because I thought it might help me with my research project. I found articles in it that I had read, so I figured it was an edited collection that would be useful to me as I continue to search for sources for my final project. As I read through it I found that the first section, “Rhetoric Revealed” was the most helpful to me. This was due in part to the fact that I enjoyed the ideas that rhetoric needs to be done “out there,” which was mentioned in the introduction. Other suggestions in the introduction were the need to have a different professional disposition, shedding of adornment of academics, new participatory and analytic tools, and to ground rhetoric in the conception of public need. I agree with these four, but have some trouble with grounding it in public need. I’m sure this is a result of the class, but who determines what is needed, and who needs it, as well as who decides what should/could be done as a result?

There’s a push for scholars to allow rhetoric to go public, which made me question what that means. Certainly, people are aware of rhetoric, and it seems as though they are as weary of it as they were thousands of years ago due to its constant association with politics. As I understand it, the push for rhetoric to go out there is an attempt to achieve a new disciplinary identity. I grapple with this a bit because of the amount of time I spend on theory. At which point are you ready to jump from theory to application? When do you know you’re ready to go out there? I understand the need to study theory. I actually enjoy it, because I feel as though I know so little about rhetoric despite being in the PhD program, but the chapter by Ackerman “Rhetorical Engagement in the cultural economies of cities” pushed me to think about what rhetoric out there means. Ackerman focuses on

civic engagement, which he defines as an attempt to accurately name and understand the “rhetorical investments of citizen-scholar in public life” in cities. He doesn’t clearly argue that rhetoric should enjoy the prominence in public life it once did, but he does suggest that an attempt to bring rhetoric back to the public would be beneficial to both the scholars in the field and the public. His solution is more involved service learning courses that look at the economic situation of the city, as opposed to internships that mask as service learning courses. I don’t have a great deal of experience with service learning, though I do know that the description service learning is problematic for some. The book wasn’t as helpful as I thought it would be, but it did force me to rethink how it is that I’d approach my final paper. It also helped narrow the scope of the search for sources, so while it wasn’t the be all source of information I thought it would be it did help to point me in the right direction.

Final Semester Reflection Journal 10

The last few weeks of the semester were equal parts informative, stressful, and engaging. The oral reports and writing troikas helped me to continue thinking through my final project. This was beneficial because everyone’s projects approaches risk communication differently. There are different angles targets in terms of risk, and risk communication. These different understandings of key concepts discussed throughout the semester proved interesting because despite the class reading the same materials each person has gone off in a different direction. I found this exciting because we’ve all been exposed to, and/or engaged or grappled with the same theories or applications, but chose to work with them in many different areas. It seems we’re all making an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice in some way.

At this point my readings for the class have centered on my final project. This paper keeps taking me in different directions. My current anxiety stems from the various research areas of each source. My goal is to present information that explains what influences and informs my analysis. I want the different sources to be an indication of the many areas to research in regards to risk communication while also capturing the many factors that influence this type of communication. My biggest concern is that this makes sense in my head from an organizational standpoint, but won’t be easy to follow for my audience. I’m also currently having issues with my introduction. Do I introduce the drought in California, or do I discuss rhetoric first? Who is my audience here? Do I take the approach of trying to encourage the public to become more civically engaged because this issue impacts them? If so, how does that change my introduction and overall writing style? Is it possible to do that with an academic audience as my grader? I keep telling myself to focus on the practice, and not the product. The most exciting part about this process has been reading sources that cover different areas of risk communication, and risk analysis in one article, and connecting them to the commercial I plan to analyze. Reading about risk communication, and seeing it real life by way of the artifacts analyzed in class is one thing, but putting together the knowledge gained in class, and sources that I found to help write this paper is a different experience. I find myself more and more thinking about everything that goes in to communicating in this way, and how a rhetorician, or scientist, or expert, etc. can possibly take all of this into account and reach an audience in a timely matter. Isn’t urgency implied in risk communication?

Per usual, at the end of the semester I find myself with more questions than answers. While there is no formula to effectively compose these messages, but one thing is clear and that’s the fact that before you can ever think to reach an audience and communicate a risk you have to listen and observe the audience you want to reach.