connexions interview with

ANNE SURMA

Transcript of the interview with Anne Surma, a senior lecturer in English and Professional Writing in the School of Arts, at Murdoch University in Perth, Western Australia. Anne has also worked as an editor and writing consultant in the commercial sector.

The interview was recorded for issue 2(1). It was conducted by Kyle Mattson, via Skype, on November 17, 2014, and transcribed from the recorded interview by Quan Zhou, *connexions*' section editor.

The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions* Vimeo channel at https://vimeo.com/115346025

Can you describe your present career in light of international professional communication?

I guess the question's a little bit daunting. I suppose I don't think of myself as… I don't use that label typically, though, of course, much of what I do revolves around the idea of international professional communication. So, I'm an academic in a university in Western Australia, in Perth. I work in the English and Creative Arts program. I'm the chair of that program. This is a program that teaches literature, creative writing, professional writing, and theater and drama. I've been here for a number of years working in a teaching capacity, as well as a researcher. I guess, although I have done some extensive teaching in the field of professional writing, for instance, and in the area

of critical public relations, it's more in my research that I really have the opportunity to explore professional communication, and writing, in particular, in the international and, in fact, the global realm—which is, you know, an area of my particular interest, as my latest book kind of demonstrates.

I suppose I should also say, though—and this is by means of kind of contextualizing my position in the field, because, of course, communication is a very broad field and, in some ways, a highly contested field—my background is in literary studies, so I come to the field with a very keen interest in language and text, rather than in the broader questions, I guess, of communications. So I'm very interested in communication in context, communication as textual, social practice. And, I guess, that drives a lot of the work that I do in my present role, here, at the university, as a teacher and as a researcher, as well.

What previous experience in international professional communication, if any, has prepared you for your present career?

I, actually, realize that I love this question, because it made me think about all kinds of things in my life, and... I'll suggest, I suppose, a few strands that have probably influenced my place now, and how I've got here. First of all, I come from a family, a blended-cultural family. I'm originally from the UK, but my parents are mid-Europeans, so I grew up in a household where communication across culture was really important—and I don't just mean in the kind of broad sense. I mean in the sense of understanding the ways in which different people see the world, understand the world, communicate their worlds with one another—that was the kind of the world I grew up in. So, from the outset, communication was something that was... a problem, in the richest possible sense that I could use that term, for me.

I had one of my first significant professional jobs working for the international cultural and educational organization, the British Council, in London, in the late 18... 1980s, and I worked there in their design and publishing department as a production editor. So, I was working on panel exhibitions, on international newsletters, on literature magazines, on a whole host of publications where the ways in which we connected with our readership—and they were a diverse readership, across the globe—was absolutely crucial. And I think I really developed, not only technical skills in communication,

but a real sense of the kind of practical, ethical, social dimensions and qualities of communicating in a global context, from that experience.

And, then, of course, I migrated to Australia in the early 1990s, so I had this very naive idea that, when I arrived here, because so many people spoke English, that we'd all understand each other. But I had probably never found myself in such a foreign place. And it really took a number of years to learn that culture is not just about speaking different languages. It's a whole set of practices and behaviors and attitudes that all have an impact on the ways in which we connect with, and relate to, and communicate with others. So, all those things have been really significant in informing the place I now have come to, in relation to international professional communication.

What would you say are particular accomplishments of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

I guess, you know, the kind of quick or glib answer might be advances in technology. But I just… that's probably a very lazy answer, and it probably doesn't address some of the other key things that are going on. I think—and I think we may talk about technology later, so I'll, perhaps, leave that to one side—and say that I think, perhaps one of the key accomplishments, as far as I'm concerned as a researcher and as a erstwhile practitioner, is that we've had the opportunity and the benefit of working in an interdisciplinary way, in our field, so that we understand that, when we communicate, we are not working in isolation. We are necessarily… involving, and becoming involved in, a range of disciplines, in order to explore our field in more detail, more meaningfully and more productively. And I think, for me, some of the exciting things about research that have emerged, say in Australia, but, perhaps, more particularly internationally, have been the ways in which a range of disciplines have become significant in helping us understand our field. So for me, in particular, perhaps, the field of philosophy generally, but ethics, in particular, political theory, sociology, history, all of these, I think, are absolutely pivotal to helping us navigate our way as we explore this, this extremely broad field that we occupy.

What would you say are some challenges of international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

I think there are particular challenges, and I think the challenges are symptomatic, quite obviously, of the kind of world we live in. I think there is a great risk that we treat communication as an instrument... or as an intrumentalist kind of *object*, if you like, that we treat it in ways that don't understand, or that bypass, the ways in which communication is, essentially, about our relationships with other people. I worry that the instrumentalist approach to communication can elide, or obscure, or even leave out altogether from the picture the fact that communicating is about connecting with others, it's about our social relations with others.

And, I think, while technology can do wonderful things to enable certain forms of connections, certain means of connection with others, there is a risk that, with many of our technologies, that we actually forget the human dimension. And I think that, working in the field of communication, this is a real challenge for us—that communication not be understood, primarily, as a commercial enterprise; that it be understood, rather, as I've mentioned, as social, ethical... relational activity.

I do worry about the commercial and instrumentalist dimension. And, I think, we need to be vigilant about that, and critical of it, at every turn. And, certainly, as a teacher and as a supervisor of many PhD students, I am always at pains to urge my students to think about these things, to think about what it means to communicate, other than to communicate for one's own profit or benefit—that there must be some other purpose to this thing that we... that helps keep us alive.

How do you see technology or changes in technology impacting, maintaining, or altering international professional communication practice, research, and/or pedagogy in your region of the world or elsewhere?

Technology has the potential to, and has already, indeed, made significant changes, or helped us change, in fact, the way that we think about communication, the way that we do communicate with one another, both locally and globally—and some of the changes have been just mind blowing. I think we continue to be amazed by the reach,

the speed, and the immediacy of our communication, with the various technologies that we have at our disposal—and I'm using a first person plural, here, talking in the *we*, but, of course, we always do need to remember that technology and its advances are not... a privilege enjoyed by everyone across the world. And so, issues of power become particularly important here as we think about who has access to what technology, and in what ways might that technology be deployed by various individuals or institutions across the world. So I think we need to think about the ways in which, yeah, sure technology is changing the way we communication, but we need to think about who has particular access to certain kinds of technologies, and what kinds of reach do those individuals or institutions have in their use of technology.

I think, you know, we also need to remember that technology is not inherently good, or inherently bad. It's the way in which it's used in particular contexts that will determine... how it means, what it means, and to what ends we might use it. I do think that those very advantages that I spoke of, in terms of reach, speed, and immediacy, should alert us to some of the potential drawbacks of technology. I think there is the risk that we may not be communicating with care. And I use the term *care* very particularly, here, and very specifically—and I write about this in the research that I do—and I'm interested in care as, not only in its most obvious sense, here, in terms of doing something with deliberation and a self-conscious kind of approach, but I'm talking about care in its broader sense, in terms of the interdependent relations that we share with others, that we are born as interdependent beings, and we owe an obligation to one another to care for them.

I'm coming to this argument in a very short-hand way, and so I don't have time to go into detail, here, but what I would suggest is that, when we use technology, we should be using it with care. And I mean, by that, that we need to think about the kinds of relations and relationships that technology enables us to set up with others. Or the kinds of relationships from which we might be disabled by our use of technology. That we should be thinking, again, primarily, of the ways in which our responsibilities to, or obligations towards others are facilitated by technology, and the ways in which those might be inhibited or precluded.

What kinds of international and intercultural experiences and skill sets has higher education taught students to help them transition to industry? In what ways could higher education do a better job preparing the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

I think that's a really interesting question, Kyle, and it's a very timely one in the Australian context, where there is a... I think you could, probably, safely say... a battle raging at the moment about the purpose and the aims of higher education, and its role in society, and the degree to which the university, for instance, should serve as... some kind of production factory for industry. And there is a lot of conflict and debate and tension around this question.

From a personal and professional point of view, as a scholar working in the field, I do see the value of the kinds of links that we might forge with industry, with our students, through, for example, work placement, internships, and so on, that offer them the on-the-ground pragmatic, practical experience that will equip them with the kinds of skills that they will need later when they go into industry. So I do fully support that endeavor, those kinds of initiatives.

I do think we do need to be really careful though. There seems to me to be, perhaps an overenthusiasm to ensure that our students are industry-ready as soon as they leave the university. And I see a different role for universities. It may sound rather regressive these days, but, for me, you know, the time that students spend in a university is a really special time to step back, to reflect, to be self-reflexive about the activities, the practices, the environments, and the ideologies with which the world in which they live is engaged, and the professional worlds into which they will move are… embedded in. I think the university is the best place for us to stop and think about those questions, very critically. And when I say critically, I'm using the term to suggest, not in a kind of destructive kind of way, but to think critically about these things is to ask questions about them, to check that the ways in which particular industries—communication industries, for instance—are operating are ways in which we feel is contributing to the kind of society that we want to build, that we want to be part of, that we want to contribute to, as professionals.

So, I guess I'm always a little bit wary about, perhaps, what I see is the overenthusiasm on some people's part, to make our students industry ready, because

I feel that, while, of course, the kinds of relationships that the university and the community and industry might have are extremely valuable, I think we need to maintain the distinction between them, and understand that universities are places of learning, and critical-reflective learning is at the heart of the education enterprise, as far as I'm concerned.

What has industry done well to help higher education teach international and intercultural experiences and skill sets, or to help their own employees develop such experiences and skill sets? What else might industry do to help prepare the next generation of graduates for international professional communication?

In one part of the answer to this question, I can probably only speak in quite broad terms. I mean, I do think, certainly in the Australian context, that we see that industry—and I'm using the term very broadly here, to mean all kinds of industry for whom communications is important, and that's about just every industry—I do see that industry is very interested in ensuring that their employees have opportunities to undertake ongoing professional development to hone their communicating skills, their capacity to communicate in a range of contexts, and so on. And in the Australian context, there are fairly good relationships set up, in some sectors at least, between industry and the university—the university sometimes providing those kinds of professional development opportunities to industry.

I do worry though, again, because I have a particularly strong sense that we should never think of communication as some of kind of skill separable from everything else we do in our workplace lives, as well as in the rest of our lives, so that the risk of, let's say, sending employees to a workshop, or a training course, is that the kinds of communication in which they may be immersed for that one day, or those two days, or whatever it is, may be seen separately from the work they, then, go back to do, on a day-to-day basis. Obviously, there are some wonderful professional development courses that offer employees the opportunity to draw on their own work practices in order to be able to refine their skills in communicating. But I think, too often, it's a question of going to a workshop, having a workbook, going through a whole set of exercises and then coming back to work and carrying on as if nothing has changed. I'm being rather

glib, here, because... but, of course, I'm simply trying to make a point, and I'm not trying to denigrate the value of certain kinds of professional development.

But, I guess the point I'm getting to is that I think, more and more, there are some really exciting learning and teaching practices. And I don't know how widespread they are in the States, but they're an emerging phenomenon, here. The idea that, actually, researchers and professionals could come together, and are coming together more often, to work together on the ways in which communication happens *in situ*. So, just to be clear about this, the kinds of research I'm talking about are, not simply—although this would be part of it—the kind of ethnographic approach where the researcher will go into industry, but there are really some exciting practices going on, and, in fact, I'm hoping to be involved in a large project, next year, where we actually enact some of these practices... going into the workplace, and carrying out video ethnography. So, for instance, filming professionals at work. So, researchers going into a workplace, filming professionals at work and, then, with those professionals, sitting down and reviewing those videos and, together, researchers and professionals interrogating, analyzing, reflecting on... their practices, using the opportunity of communication as it happens *in situ* to learn about our practices as communicators.

And I think that helps us to overcome that risk of treating any kind of professional development in communication as something separate from what we do on a day-to-day basis. And some results of this kind of work, and I've been... most of the work I've been reading about where this has been going on with brilliant results has been in the hospital sector... so, in care settings, whether it's communication between physicians and patients, or between physicians and other health professionals... filming those exchanges, those interactions, and then, with those professionals, researchers reflecting on, and the professionals, in particular, reflecting on, and learning from the ways in which they communicate, to talk about ways in which they may do this differently, better—the kinds of things that you miss when you're doing things habitually. We communicate all the time. It's part of who we are. It's part of what we do. When we do this as professionals, we habituate ourselves to certain kinds of practices. And this form of video ethnography, this reflexive video ethnography, gives us the opportunity, again, to step back, and to look at ourselves, listen to ourselves, watch ourselves in action, and think about ways in which we, perhaps, are excluding others, talking over others, not

paying attention to the words of others, in the ways in which we engage with them. So I think those kinds of relationships between industry and higher education, the higher education sector are potentially very, very exciting.

I mean, I think you could take this kind of video-reflexive ethnography into all kinds of contexts that would be really exciting, and really offer some eye-opening opportunities that... from which, not only those involved could learn, but we could, then, be using those—obviously with the permission of those involved—but using those videos to teach, and to learn about the ways in which, *in situ*, we engage in communication across... across cultures, across workplaces, across professions. There are a whole, there are a myriad of ways in which I think this kind of approach might be deployed. ◼

About the Interviewee

Anne Surma an academic chair of and a senior lecturer in the English and Creative Arts program. She supervises several postgraduate students working on topics ranging from creative writing to representations of cultural identity. She has also worked in private industry as an editor and writer, and as a workshop facilitator and consultant, advising on communication strategy and practice. Her research interests include cosmopolitan orientations to communicating; public communication as ethical discourse and creative practice; corporate responsibility; and discursive approaches to dominant and marginalized narratives in public and organizational stories.

Email. A.Surma@murdoch.edu.au

URL. http://profiles.murdoch.edu.au/myprofile/anne-surma/

Contact.
Dr. Anne Surma
Room 038, Level 3, Education and Humanities Building
Murdoch University (Murdoch Campus)
South Street
Murdoch
Western Australia