



connexions interview with **REBECCA DINGO**

Transcript of the interview with Rebecca Dingo, an associate professor of composition and rhetoric in the Department of English at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, USA.

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The video recording of this interview is available on the *connexions'* Vimeo channel at <https://vimeo.com/166974163>

What opportunities does the Global South present for professional communication scholars and practitioners?

I think that the Global South presents several different kinds of opportunities. I think for one thing that... as rhetoric and communication scholars... that we can, I think, learn through cross-cultural communication. And so, for one thing, particularly in the US where we're very isolated, uh... I think that the Global South can offer us new ways of thinking that we might not have thought about before because of how isolated that we are. And that... I'm thinking about Arabella Lyon's work, which...



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who is a cross-cultural rhetorical scholar. Uh... I just finished her book, and one of the things that I think she demonstrates so well is... uh... the way that if we were to mix those Western notions of rhetoric with Eastern notions of rhetoric, we would come up with a very different notion of deliberation, which is what her book focuses on. What her argument is is that human rights issues may be better solved by mixing these kinds of communication styles, and so what I see that the Global South offers uh... scholars in the West is ways to rethink, kind of, our rhetorical practices. Uh... but I also think that... I think by joining together we can create new rhetorical practices that are better at... that are going to be better suited to solve problems in the world.

What challenges does the Global South present for professional communication scholars and practitioners? You mentioned that in the US, we are very isolated. Would you say that is one of the challenges?

Yeah, I think that's actually one of the major issues. And so... I think that oftentimes, I look at in, sort of, popular media or—not even... not so popular media but just, sort of, Web 2.0 media—at the way that the Global South tends to be represented in the US is, you know, a bunch of cultures that are pretty... although they are represented as being very essentialized in some ways, but the same kinds of ways of representing occur over and over again. I mean, for example, women from the Global South are considered to be this monolithic group that needs to be saved by, you know, Western intervention or by... or that men need to change their... the way that they act in the Global South. But, in fact, I think that it's much more dynamic than that. Uh... I mean, I know that... I know that it's much more dynamic, and so it's important. I think that... would you repeat the question again?

Uh... yes, yes... the biggest challenge I think is to think beyond what it is that we are constantly fed in popular media about what is happening across the world, and to think about what stories we are not hearing and to think about, sort of, the cases that we hear as exceptional as opposed to the norm, uh... and so, kind of, to do more research. And I'm thinking here again of Rachel Riedner's work, and she has a book that just came out, and it's called *Writing Neoliberal Values*. And one of the

arguments that she makes in that book is that we have to start thinking about the bits of texts and, sort of, these stories that we... kind of... that are hinted at and follow them to understand more about global economy and the... more specifically about how, uh... everyday lives are lived and not necessarily these exceptional stories. And so... I think one of the biggest challenges is to be more aware of, um, political... eco... geopolitical and economical issues that connect us all but how that they end up expressing themselves differently in each... each culture, um... and understand in the West, too, that we're at the... we... we are a source... we are a place of power and that, um, we have to be mindful of the way that we have been brought up to understand the US as being this... this exceptional place... um... and understand that we are a part of this global economy.

Given media's stereotyping of the Global South, how can we step outside of the stereotypes to really approach the Global South?

I think that that's a good question. Um... I think one... I think there is one... one sort of more... a simple way to do it, although I think that this has complications in saying that. Um... I think that people who do ethnographic projects in the Global South are really... they do really important work because we hear on-the-ground voices of actual people; um... and that's one way that we can learn. And again, but to understand that the work... that that there's a power relationship between the researcher and the person, the subject that is speaking. That the subject may assume that the researcher wants to hear something specific, or the subject... the researcher may assume that all these other kinds of things about the subject. So that can be complicated, but it's certainly one way to do it. I think the other way is to be... uh, I mean, this is going to sound sort of simplistic, but I think trying to keep up with current events for one thing and think about what in the current events—what in the stories of the current events—is not being told, what is missing perhaps in that little... particularly now as information is passed so quickly via web 2.0, um... via Twitter, via Facebook, all those... that we get these snippets of stories but what are we not hearing about, um... and start to kind of delve further into the nuances.

Um... I'm trying to think of a really good example of something recent. Um... Yeah... Um..., you know, I think about, in the US in particular, we have

heard a lot about, like, the... the Syr... Syrian refugees. And what we hear about is that they 're dangerous, that they're, they're Muslims that are gonna come and, you know, produce terror and whatnot. And we're not... we don't see... I was just in... I was in Europe at the same time when this... um... when, uh, everything kind of came to a head. And in Europe, what I saw was countries that said we welcome Syrian refugees. And so to sort of think about those two different stories against each other and the nuances of, you know, why is the U... why are parts of Europe saying we welcome them, and why is the US saying we don't. And so to start to uncover the, I guess, the layers of the story is what is really important. It's hard work to do. I mean... in my research and my networking arguments book, I sort of suggest that we have to kind of unravel all of those different strands. Um... but one of the hard things I think about doing that is "When do we stop, or which strand do we actually follow?" And I don't think that there's a right or wrong answer to that. I think that you have to go where you're gonna be able to find the answers and understand that... the analysis you are doing or the research you are doing is incomplete. And that's, I think, part of the other thing as scholars is to think about, that we're only touching... uh, touching a... a little piece of the... of the larger story but that one piece might be really important in the larger picture.

How have you addressed these various challenges in your own teaching, research, or leadership roles?

Well, um, I feel like that is always at the back of my mind in anything I do, whether it's teaching, whether it's scholarship. And also, I'm about to take over UMASS's first-year writing... or... actually their entire writing program next year, and so it's something that I have in the back of my mind as I think about the curriculum. Um, that... I think about how ultimately, we are preparing—starting, you know, at the first... level of the first-year student—we're preparing students to work in—I mean my husband always is, so I have to give him credit—is that we're preparing students to work for jobs that don't exist yet. Um... and given, like, the way that communication has just exploded, that I can easily contact somebody in South Africa who I've done work with and hear back from them often times within a few hours, if not right away. That things happen so quickly that we have to have students to be

aware of how they are presenting themselves, how to best communicate with people and to understand sort of the context in which they come from.

So, for example, you know, I'm mindful when I did work in South Africa that the institution that I was working with was the University of Western Cape where... which was traditionally... a traditionally a... a "colored school"—what they say as a "colored school" in South Africa—where, you know, people who didn't have white skin or black skin but the in-between, you know, went to school. And I was well aware that, you know, during Apartheid that the funding for that institution was so... there was so little money that was given. And that... even though that was, you know, somewhat—not a long time ago, you know, I think 30 years ago—but we still see trickle-down effects of, you know, how people... how people who come from that institution are treated; what the expectations of that institution. And so I'm... I try to be really... I try to teach students to start being aware of those things. And I, again, having been to South Africa many... several times, I still don't fully understand that cultural context, but I am aware that I don't understand it and I'm aware of constantly trying to learn new things. And so that's one thing that I try to keep in mind even at that first-year level... is to think about that this is just starting to prepare them to work for jobs that they don't quite know that exist yet... and then also to assume that they are not going to just be communicating with each other. It's going to be a trans-global experience in the future.

Um... at the level of my graduate students, um, I actually really... I have a lot of students who end up wanting to do ethnographic work in the Global South. And I'm encouraging of them to travel, 'cause that's something that the US—that people in the US—don't do. Um, I know it's expensive for them to do, but I really encourage that. But I also want them to be mindful that, again, if they are doing on-the-ground work that they're only getting a very small piece of the pie. It's an important piece of the pie but to put it in a wider context and to understand, like, what they're... I mean I... being schooled in feminist theory and wo... women's studies, I want them to be aware of the power dynamic and how they might be using these stories, um, and under... as... as a form of capital for jobs in the future and to be aware of that dynamic and how to maybe think about... "giving back" is the wrong word, because that makes it sound like it's some sort of philanthropic, you know, kind of project, but

instead to be careful with those stories and to be mindful of how what... what they're doing with them and try to have their... the people who they're working with, um, be... be really strong participants, um, in what is said.

Um... I also asked my students, um, to be really aware of global political economy. Um, that... and that is a learning... a sharp learning curve and one that I think I'm still trying to master especially because our economic situation is constantly shifting. We went from neoliberal policy to austerity policies, and there's like a fine line between the two. But to understand that one, in the US, we are a superpower in terms of... especially within economics and that we are wealthy here and that we have a lot of resources. Um... and then to understand that those resources are dependent upon the backs of people who don't have resources—and to start thinking about that relationship. So, I try really hard to teach, you know, um, documentary films that kind of show these, because I think that oftentimes they're easier to grasp than theory by teaching them alongside theories. So, for example, I really like the movie *Life and Debt*, which is about Jamaica's, um, economy and their relationship with the International Monetary Fund. So that they understand, like, how these Western, um, wealthy super-national organizations end up affecting, like, actual lived lives, uh, lived experiences. Um, I also... I teach usually an essay, I cannot remember who it is by right now, but it's by two women who look at, um, the way Structural Adjustment Policy in... an African country but... how, because of the Structural Adjustment Policy, women had to work sort of the triple workday. They were working in the home, they were working in their farms, like their... their mini-farms, and then also selling things in the marketplace... and how gendered violence increased significantly. It correlates with Structural Adjustment Policy. So... so to think about that these policies are not just happening between big figureheads but they just trickle down into everyday lives.

Um... and for my research, gosh, that's a hard question. As I'm thinking about my next project, which I'm looking at the rise of... of... the proliferation and rise and circulation of global girl empowerment initiatives in the US and... and in Europe. Um... there's been like the Girl Effect, Girl Rising, Girl Up. And I'm really interested in why it is girls right now. It used to be women in the early part... part of the... at the, at the turn of the, from the... from... from a... to the 20th... 21st

century. And I... I'm not sure... I think I'm not... I'm not exactly sure how to... I'm, I'm really interested in the way that... the way that we have, in the US, have really embraced these, um... um... campaigns. And... I really think it's important to turn a lens on ourselves, and I think that's one of the things I want to teach graduate students, too: to be critical to understand what... even how the Global South perceives us and then how we're perceiving them. Um... so, yeah! That's not... that's not the... most, I don't know, fleshed-out answer, but it's... I'm really... it's something I'm really working on right now.

That's very interesting. So would you say economic considerations are part of these girl empowerment initiatives?

Yeah. Well, it's interesting that one thing that I found with one of the groups that I was looking at... it's... it's a partnership between Nike and the UN. I think it's... I think it's Girl... Girl Effect that's... or Girl Up. Anyways, it's hard to remember. They're all girl, girl girl, girl. But, Nike's business plan essentially is trying to create a market, uh, for their sneakers in the Global South by hiring... by educating girls enough so that they can work in these factories but have enough income to purchase the... the items that they're making, too. I mean, and there's... they celebrate that at the same time. So I think... I think that's part of also thinking about the pernicious underside effects of things or why, you know, why businesses are doing these things.

With that thought and given that professional communication research and practice often involve issues of business and economics, would you say that makes professional communication scholars and practitioners well poised to address social justice issues in the Global South?

Yeah, I think that... I think that professional communication scholars and people who are doing professional communication outside the academy have the possibility, I think, to do really great social justice projects. I think that the challenge is that because we already have wider discourses around the Global South that ends up stereotyping them over and over again, it's difficult to create something that works against that, because... people expect to see the downtrodden woman, the girl who's abused, the man who, you know, is... is the abuser, and they have a hard time

imagining other ways of seeing the Global South. So that's the biggest challenge, but I think that that's where professional communication... communication professionals and professional communication scholars actually can be at the forefront, I think, of changing these kinds of stereotypes by thinking about how to communicate social justice issues, um, more thoughtfully and more attuned to relations of power. I think that with the work I'm doing right now on the girl eff... on the girl... on the global girls empowerment, um, initiatives... what's one thing where I'm stuck is that all of the... all of those organizations tell the same story over and over again, and they're not getting at, um, what Rachel Riedner would... would say is the... the gendered violence. I mean, she... she uses the term violence purposely and not to mean violence literally of physically hitting or hurting somebody but also the economic violence or political violence that kind of consumes... consumes a person's life. Um... so I think that to get at that it's oftentimes about the economy and the politics and not necessarily about the culture, which is what we tend to see over and over again, that's where I feel like a really great intervention for, um, professional writers and then professional communication scholars could really intervene. And so I don't know if they've... I... I don't know if I've seen anything that anyone has done specifically that I think is a really great example, um... but I think that we have the tools to do that kind of work. It's just having to figure out how to do it in a way that will get an audience to actually listen to it.

I think the most important thing is to... again, because we... we hear so many stereotypes about who is... who is the Global... the Sou... the citizen in the Global South, that is such a, I think, a problem because when people... I think the most important thing is to understand that—much like how in the United States people have a variety of different kinds of personalities and cult... and backgrounds and traditions and interests and whatnot—that that is the case too in the Global South. Uh... I'm thinking of... I... I showed the film *Half the Sky* to a group of students a couple of years ago. Um, and... I'm very critical of the... of that film, but the best thing happened that could've happened after the film. The first person to raise their hand to ask a question and to discuss said—raised his hand and said... raised his hand and said, "I am an Afghani feminist and I'm offended by this film." And so I think that, like, that moment where he... 'cause there were a lot of young

women there who—and the film itself paints, you know, really paints, um, men from the Global South as being, kind of, barbarians in a lot of ways. And that was like the most brilliant moment because he just completely shattered, I think, all of their stereotypes; that he was there, that he wanted to engage, and that he's called himself a feminist. Um... and I... I think that... that... I... I wish that that moment can happen over and over again among my students so that they could see that people from across the world are, you know, are... are... are varied and there, I don't know, that there's nuances and whatnot.

In what ways should professional communication programs and teachers be preparing students for work with businesses and industries situated in the Global South and for working with people who are native to the Global South—coworkers, clients, audiences, and communities?

Yeah... I... I think it will be great to have more classes that are... where students can meet, you know, can share a unit of some sort, um, and study together and have conversations about it. And so... I think that that would facilitate a couple things. One it would allow students to see how students in other places, you know, do work in a... in a classroom and then also have their perspective that... of how they kind of come at it and to create a kind of conversation. Um... I'm trying to think what else. Um... hmm... I also think... I really think travel is important, but I know that sometimes when people from the US go to the Global South, they end up being sort of treated like royalty... to say the least. And I... and there's a lot of, I think, wining and dining and whatnot. And I'm talking more from scholars and teachers. And I... and I think that, um, to understand that... I don't think that that often... that gets at, um, what actually happens in most countries. That's not how real life is in the US, that's not like real life anywhere else. And so to really understand a culture... to be less of a tourist and more participatory and, you know, um, and understanding the way a university works, the way, I don't know, the kinds of classes, the kinds of students that are there and whatnot. Um, so I don't know how to... how to get out of that dynamic, but I think that there are oftentimes this... I don't know... um. Yeah, or this idea that, um, the U.S. scholar knows all kind of things and that is not the case and to recognize that the U.S. scholar does not know all.

What might Global South businesses and industries do to facilitate joint research/teaching with professional communication academics?

I think that one thing that, um—and this is from my experiences doing some collaborative work in South Africa—that one way that... that, um, I think, collaboration can happen, um, between institutions is by having a common problem that is in that particular local, local con... a common problem in both local contexts. And so that... to see how—I mean, I’m thinking more... this is more on the sciences, but I think that there’s probably some parallels in professional communication. But, you know, um... if a community is having problems with, like, watershed issues, for example, how is it that, you know, water has been, um, dealt with locally in both contexts? And, like, can... if... if both parties look at the problem together and talk about it, I think that some new understandings could develop out of... out of that. And so I think having some sort of common issue... and this... I guess, you know, in women’s studies, I’m thinking, you know, if gender violence is an issue that’s happening in two different communities, like, how are they both addressing it? And what can we learn from those? I think that having that kind of collaboration could be really, really useful. And so... it’s less about coming as, you know, “you are the expert and we are coming to you for your knowledge” as much as, like, “how do we bring our knowledge together to solve this issue? Because, you know, we each have different ways perhaps... or different ways of being trained to deal with this. And so we could help each other in that way.”

Would you say information and communication technology will facilitate such joint research/teaching or will it hinder the collaboration?

I think it... I think it can be. I mean, it’s... I think that on... on even the basic level that there’s time differences, you know, and trying... and also different kinds of expectations. Like, I know in working in South Africa that, you know, responding to an email in three months is pretty normal, whereas in the US we would expect it to be usually like within a week or so to have, kind of, to figure... to have communication back and forth. And so... I think that being mindful that it’s not because they’re rude; it’s because there’s all these other things... expectations, you know, of people’s time,

and so therefore we have to understand that. Uh... so I think that there's those kinds of nua... uh, those kinds of things that end up being... really make... make collaboration hard. And I think that, um, also collaborating even over Skype is great, but it's hard when you are just first meeting somebody. That it's easier if you can go and actually go... meet one-on-one, or a group of people can meet together, um, over several times face-to-face; that that makes a huge difference, but that that sets the basis for doing more collaboration, I think, over various kinds of technologies. Um... and then also I think that we... and I'm aware of this too... that, you know, any time you are doing any kinds of... kind of cross-cultural collaboration that I have expectations in the back of my mind of who the people are who are on the other end and to rem... to constantly put myself in check that that might not be the case. And so I know that that probably happens on the other side too, so I think that that's something to I'll need to keep in mind too. ■