The publication of a new book on the ‘intercultural’ is always an important event, especially in our troubled times where the ‘Other’ is often the victim of rejection, prejudice and violence. I always get very excited when a new book is published on the topic as I eagerly wait to see if it contributes to transform the field of intercultural communication, which is in dire need of further deconstruction and renewal (Dervin, Gajardo, & Lavanchy, 2011). 2010-2011 have been exceptional in this sense, as tens of books on the ‘intercultural’ have been published in the two languages I work with (English and French).

*Introducing Intercultural Communication* was published in 2011 and written by a “multinational team of authors” (book cover) from the University of Queensland Australia. Though not officially presented as a textbook, it obviously serves as one. The book is composed of thirteen chapters and a very useful glossary. The chapters cover various aspects of intercultural communication and the *Global*: e.g. the influence of culture on perception, (non-)verbal communication, categorizations, subgroups and identities, intercultural conflicts, etc. Each chapter contains theory corners, case illustrations, and further reading.

Introducing intercultural communication to English-speaking readers from potentially the entire world is a real challenge and necessitates selecting authors, theories, etc. to fill 300 pages. It also involves positioning oneself in this confusing jungle: the ‘intercultural’ has been theorized and researched in many different ways and I believe it is important to make students aware of this fact and to help them to situate their own work within a clear intercultural ‘paradigm’ to avoid confusion (for both novice researchers and their readers, that is).

Though there seems to be a conscious effort to “decolonize” theories and methods in the book in question and to concentrate on other things (e.g. quotes from ‘postcolonial’ authors and pictures of rarely presented contexts are inserted) the choice that seems to have been made by the authors is to present and rely on many debated “classics” from or attached to the field of intercultural communication: Bennett, Berry, Gudykunst, Ting-Toomey, E.T. Hall, Hofstede, etc. Of course other “revered” scholars such as Adorno, Althusser, Foucault, Said, etc. are introduced but their place is secondary. The three authors do mention the fact that some of the ‘intercultural’ scholars that they work with have been put into question: for example in Chapter 5 entitled Cultural Orientations and Behaviours, we are told about e.g. McSweeney’s brilliant and much needed attack against Hofstede’s culturalist and essentialist approach (2002). They dedicate 4 lines on p. 101 to explicate her criticisms and conclude by saying that “Up until this date, Hofstede’s model has been included in almost all intercultural communication books”, which seems to justify the fact that many pages are given to the Dutch “entrepreneur”. The same goes for concepts such as acculturation, culture shock, ethnicity, etc. which are presented in an uncritical manner and become “ready-made discourses” in the book, while they have been reviewed extensively e.g. by some anthropologists (Bhatia & Ram, 2009) and sociologists (Brubaker, 2004). Why not include these criticisms?

A central question derives from this: should we use all of these scholars and concepts in a book introducing such a confusing and confused field? I am asking this question because, while reading the book, I had the impression that the authors were often oscillating between what I call ‘liquid’ and ‘solid’ interculturality (in reference
to the sociologist Z. Bauman’s description of our world, cf. Dervin, 2011). I kept asking myself: what will students do with this? Solid interculturality is just what Hofstede et al. do to the ‘intercultural’: ‘culture’ eats up the ‘inter-’ in the word, leads to “hyperdifferentialist” views and becomes the justification for everything people do. Liquid interculturality, on the other hand, is a postmodern approach to intercultural communication which is more interested in the ‘inter-’ – as in interaction, inter-individual – than the ‘cultural’ (cf. e.g. Dervin, 2011; Holliday, 2010; Piller, 2011). Let me give you a few examples. On p. 6 (Organization of the book), the authors write in a typical discourse of ‘liquid’ interculturality: “we adopt a multicultural approach to address various issues in intercultural communication, treating identities as claims which are made, contested, negotiated in particular contexts and incorporating the critical influence of the mass media on cultural change, identity construction, and communication”. Later on in the book, ‘solid’ interculturality is omnipresent: (p. 109) “In Switzerland, you are likely to see a clock almost everywhere you go; this is a culture that runs on time and is organized around time”; (p. 104) “In Chinese culture, it is customary for the host to show respect by offering a welcome toast at the beginning of the meal”, (p. 33) “in Malaysia, friends may greet each other by folding two hands in front of the chest”, etc.

I have actually coined a phrase to describe this solid-liquid contradiction in the academia: ‘Janusian interculturality’, in reference to the two-faced Roman God Janus, the God of the doors, beginnings and endings (Dervin, 2011). To me this is very problematic as I feel that the a-contextual and generic academic discourses quoted above, which resemble and thus reinforce stereotypes, are in a way dangerous and need to be avoided in such “textbooks”. As such the authors tell the readers at the beginning of the book (p. 9) that they can be enabled to “become a critical consumer of information in the wider field of intercultural communication” by reading the book but do they give them the tools to do just that? By the way, the authors themselves do not always show criticality towards information: in the chapter “Verbal communication and culture”, in order to introduce the controversial Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis, they mention on p. 126 the classical differentialist example of the word snow in the Eskimo language. They seem to ignore the excellent article by Pullum (1991), The Great Eskimo Vocabulary Hoax, in which he shows that linguists, amongst others, have used and abused (!) this instance, which is more of a hoax than a fact (those who introduced it in the literature did not actually speak any Eskimo language)…

The authors assert on p. 15 that “Understanding other cultures is a challenge we face today, living in a global society”. But can we understand “other cultures” (it is actually human beings we are dealing with not cultures) without explicitly developing criticality towards differentialist and impressionistic “culturespeak” (Hannerz, 1999), where cultures are used in uncritical and systematic ways to talk about the self and the other? Without proper training, I am convinced that ‘solid’ interculturality easily takes over ‘liquid’ interculturality in such a Janusian approach…

I wonder why the authors haven’t actually put into practice their excellent “strategies to develop intercultural communication competence” in the concluding chapter (13): seek commonalities, overcome stereotyping and prejudice, develop flexibility and openness. A Janusian approach to intercultural communication may not always contribute to these points if the reader is not made aware and critical of the incompatibility between the ‘liquid’ and ‘solid’. If I had to use this book with first-year students, I would first train and educate my students to develop critical
competences, present different ways of working on the ‘intercultural’ and then work through the book with them…

References:


