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Orientations and Embodiment

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The goal for the next academic year is to get more content posted here. on the blog that specifically engages with ongoing work or ideas related to the community of RHM.

Since it is often helpful to have models of what we mean, the following is an example of the type of content we would like to host here. If you would like do an interview or participant in one, please contact us.

It is an interview that Sushil Oswal did with Lisa Melonçon about her work that draws on the theories of Sara Ahmed and pays particular attention to embodiment.

The interview came about because of Lisa's contribution to a special issue that Sushil edited on accessibility and disability in the business and professional communication classroom. Since these issues cross disciplines and the latter part of the interview moves directly to RHM, we decided to post it here. The end has specific directions of research that RHM can move toward that incorporates the work of Sara Ahmed.

Lisa Melonçon discusses with Sushil K. Oswal her recent project on "a theory of Intersectional Orientations" in the company of Sara Ahmed

SKO: Could we go back a bit to trace the genesis of the project? When and how did you start thinking of Sara Ahmed's work in relation to this project for the special issue of Business and Professional Communication Quarterly?

LM: Ahmed's work has been on my mind for some time. She's one of those scholars whose work I had read because I appreciated the way she writes and thinks but I hadn't tried to apply it in anyway.

In 2017, I was supposed to do a presentation at the CCCCs, "Crippling" the Writing Classroom: Normalcy, Access and Accessibility Statements," which was a critique of accessibility statements on syllabi. In preparing for that presentation (which I was unable to give due to an illness), I wanted a way to theoretically ground the main idea that forced inclusion of diversity statements was contradictory to the ideas of access and was simply perpetuating a limited view of normalcy. This presentation was the background thinking that led to the BPCQ piece.

Since in technical and professional communication and business communication, we're starting from scratch in many ways pedagogically and programmatically around issues of access and inclusion, these moves need be theorized as well as applied. That's when I realized that if you're starting from scratch and you may be pushing against institutional norms that the first step would be an orientation step. Enter Ahmed. Not only for her ideas around orientation but also her work *On Being Included*, which is closely analogous to wanting to change policies or make policies more meaningful and actually inclusive. And that idea of inclusiveness is at the heart of this piece in BPCQ.

SKO: Could you also provide the RHM audiences with some background of this research? What sort of entrepreneurial scholarship was involved in taking up this topic?

LM: What I like about this question is that it forced me to think through the steps of weaving multiple strands of scholarship—even quite disparate scholarship—together. Few people would put together business and professional communication and Sara Ahmed and disability studies, but that was one reason I wanted to do it.

Ahmed's work is highly relevant and it does exactly what good theory is supposed to do: encourage you to think differently. I had been wanting to find a way to theoretically ground this idea of that we needed to shift our pedagogical and even programmatic focus. Tanya Titchkosky's work on access in higher education was what I thought of first, but then I realized I could move from the practical aspects of accessibility and usability to Titchkosky's access to Ahmed. In my head, it worked seamlessly because I knew what broader intellectual traditions they were coming from. It was a little harder, well, a lot harder to weave that together in a way that would make sense for the more practically applied context of BPCQ.

There is a growing number of folks in RHM who approach RHM from a disability studies background, so in some ways the movement of including Ahmed or various divergent strands of scholarship are sort of par for the course. But, this project and my own work in RHM underscores the need to read wide and

deep in a way that can truly ground RHM work in multiple domains. You use the word entrepreneurial, which is a pretty good way of talking about it. In RHM, we've had to be entrepreneurial in not only establishing the space for this field, but also, and more importantly, in showing how the work we do is actually a "thing" that no longer comfortably fit into other areas within the large rhetoric and writing studies umbrella.

SKO: You draw on Ahmed's broad institutional critique in *On Being Included* and then you also engage her more identity-centered scholarship on queer theory: Could you quickly synopsise Ahmed's thought in these areas for our readers who might not be familiar with her work?

LM: Well, Sushil, that's a big, huge question that is setting me up to really not do justice to Ahmed's work. [insert laugh here.] But what I will do is a version of Melonçon bottom line, which is how I explain complex ideas and scholarship to students as a way to get them initially interested and to prompt questions. So since there won't really be a chance for a lot of follow-up questions here, I ask readers to understand that I do know I am oversimplifying for the sake of space and time.

In *On Being Included*, Ahmed makes the claim that once policies are institutionalized they often advance the same behavior they are trying to counter. While on the surface, this claim seems backward, Ahmed actually makes an astute observation. The moment we create a policy about, say diversity, we have institutionalized it to the point that often people simply point to the policy rather than doing the work of the policy. Her stance really resonated with me because I had seen this happen many, many times when I worked as a consultant. I would be brought in to fix something and often one of the first things people said or gave to me was the company's policy on the very thing I was there to address. So the takeaway there, which is particularly relevant to a lot of policies ripe for analysis in RHM, is that we—scholars and citizens and employees and community members—need to consistently question and more importantly, to consistently do the work of actually making change. Of putting the work of the policy into action.

Ahmed's other work on queer theory, identity, and emotion has been instrumental to the way that I approach research questions. So to again take her work down to the lowest common denominator, I am reminded of her description in *Queer Phenomenology* about how racialized bodies move through space and how their orientations take up space. Her premise is that spaces become racialized in how they are oriented and different bodies are allowed to move through them. This idea alone can be used in a lot of different ways, as evidenced by my taking only a small sliver and using it in the BCPQ piece.

But this whole idea of the multiple versions of orienting has tremendous potential for asking different questions about the spaces of healthcare, and in particular to some of my own research around health literacy and health disparities, how people move through these healthcare spaces. There is something about the way Ahmed writes that enabled me to see and to understand issues of race and gender (that can also be ported onto class) in ways that I had not seen before.

SKO: Thank you for this wonderful introduction to Ahmed's scholarship in the area of diversity, inclusion, and identity politics. Could we now move over to some of the key connections you are making in this BPCQ article and why do they matter for academics working in the general field of technical and professional communication?

LM: If folks read the BPCQ piece the one thing I want them to take away is that Ahmed's concept of orientation is useful to remind teachers in technical and professional communication that we need to consciously consider inclusion and diversity at the start of our planning. Higher education is so diverse with how students see themselves and their identities. We've also known that people learn differently, but what we've (in all of higher ed) have not done as well is to recognize that student identities impact how they learn. Being more open and inclusive in our classroom pedagogies is essential. Ahmed's work helps us see how to open up our pedagogies. The BPCQ article is the start of that by encouraging faculty to simply start to think differently, more inclusively in some practical and applied ways. What technical and professional communication has always done well is put theory into practice. This is just another example of that: taking Ahmed's theoretical work on identity and putting it into meaningful practice in a way that can impact students.

SKO: You advocate for a "concept of an embodied orientation to access/ability" in your article for the TPC classroom: could you expand on this concept and explain how your concept of "embodiedness" shifts our perception or perspective of the body from Nirmala Erevelles' conceptualization of "unruly bodies" and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's idea of "extraordinary bodies"?

LM: Over the last few years, I've really thought a lot about bodies and embodiment. While I don't completely buy into the "posthuman" turn running through writing studies, what I do take away from those moves is that we have to always consider the material, physical aspects of things. For me, that plays out in wanting to advance this idea of an embodied orientation to access/ability. What this means is that faculty and administrators cannot lose sight of the actual physical bodies and lives of our students.

We talk so often about students and we do that with such sincerity and care, but embodied orientation is asking faculty and administrators to take that a step farther, to push the boundaries of where we are comfortable and address the hard things. So for example, Sara Goldrick-Rab, who is a higher education policy and sociology scholar, has been doing some really solid work on food and housing insecurity in higher education. That's such a lived instantiation of embodied orientation because it shows her own personal embodied commitment but it also highlights the needs of students in embodied ways. Talking in our programs about these taboo and stigmatized topics are vastly important, but it's a shift in the way many of us in writing studies and in technical and professional communication have looked at our work.

Incorporating an embodied orientation to access means we can't forget our students have bodies and those bodies are vastly different from one another and from our own.

Embodied orientation is also a quite simple concept. How do we as faculty and administrations literally position ourselves—our physical and mental and emotional—selves in relation to our administrative work that guides programs, trains teachers, and directly impacts the access/ability of our students? Orientating our own stance to start with the question: how can we provide safe access to all our students with varying abilities and varying identities and varying lives? How can we create a classroom (and a program) that ensures an embodied orientation to access/ability? As you and I have previously discussed and it's a project I hope to get back to, is what concrete steps can we take? That's a key and essential part of embodied orientation because it means we're taking some sort of action to ensure access.

This concept of embodied orientation is a complement to Nirmala Erevelles' "unruly bodies" and Rosemarie Garland-Thompson's idea of "extraordinary bodies." I say complement because I see embodied orientation as a broader term that can house the views of "unruly" and "extraordinary" and whatever else others come up with. What I've always appreciated about disability studies scholars and their nuanced work with theories and terminologies around bodies and embodiment is that they make us—other scholars—think through bodies in different ways. Historically, dating way back to documents I've read from the 1300 and 1400s, learned men and women have consistently grappled with ways to understand the body because we live in it. That duality of being and living makes it difficult to theorize the body and even more difficult to understand the body when it is different from our own. So Garland-Thompson and Erevelles' bodies really force scholars to grapple with this uncertainty. Embodied orientation is a way to frame these different bodies from a theoretical standpoint—a literal standpoint, a literal place, a specific orientation—and work through what diverse bodies mean for inclusion. It's a way to try and put into practice what you and I have talked about, "an ideology of inclusion," and that ideology needs an embodied orientation.

SKO: Could you now also speak to how is this "embodiedness" different from, or not different from "embodiedness" as we tend to employ it in the rhetoric of health and medicine discourse?

LM: It's actually the same. The idea of embodied orientation just shifts based on context. But I didn't realize that at first. I was working on the final edits to the BPCQ piece at the same time I was working on a piece situated within RHM on something I call patient experience design (PXD). Part of PXD and the importance of it in designing health communication and information is that it has an embodied component. It wasn't until I re-read both of these pieces recently that I saw the overlaps between them. I hope to continue with the idea of embodied orientation specifically in RHM, particularly around a study where we are "testing" patient/caregiver education materials in a number of diverse settings and with diverse populations.

SKO: How would you differentiate your current thoughts on “embodiment” from your earlier explication of the theory of “technological embodiment” (2013a)?

LM: It’s funny that you ask this question. In a class I just finished up teaching, I had students read *Technological Embodiments*. Typically, I wouldn’t have them read work I’ve written, but in this case, I wanted to use this chapter to also talk about the academic writing process. While I still love this chapter for a number of reasons, it has some pretty big flaws in it. One of which is that I did not adequately define “technological embodiment.”

I made the early career scholar mistake of using too much of the existing literature to define the term. But I did write a sentence that I still like: “by destabilizing categories of the body, technological embodiment erases differences by focusing on the dispersal of embodiment through technologies” (p. 68). The key difference between this view and my more recent work is that I’ve shifted to just talking about bodies and embodiment without totally addressing the technologies that continue to push on, or disperse embodiment. So in the big ways, I don’t really see a big difference—at least not in my own head and thinking [insert laugh]—between this earlier work and my later work on embodiment.

SKO: So, in which direction is this work moving?

LM: What I need to return to, and what I hope others pick up, is the critique and analysis around the intersections of technology, in all its definitions, and embodiment.

An important strand, in RHM and technical and professional communication, is to use embodiment—an embodied orientation if you will—to think through audiences, which was a point that I made in *Technological Embodiments* (pp. 74-76). Merging an embodied orientation to include a consideration of technologies holds promise in ensuring that we have addressed the diverse needs of our diverse audiences. This sort of deliberate and thoughtful starting places ensures a type of inclusion that is necessary in both fields.

I do want to point out that this interview has made me think of all of my work in and around embodiment, which I didn’t realize until quite recently was something that I had consistently done. In other words, writing about embodiment has just become something that I do. But in having to think through this interview and the project I mentioned above on patient education materials, I realized that embodiment was a theme central to my work. Absolutely, my work on embodiment can be critiqued and should be, but what I like about it is that you can see the arc in thinking from the original foray in *Technological Embodiment* to my most recent work “Bringing the Body Back Through Performative

Phenomenology“. That arc is important as an example of continued thinking around a subject and learning to push your own thinking in different directions. It’s also important in RHM and technical and professional communication because, as I’ve said a couple of times throughout this interview, scholars and teachers have to consider the lived, real body. That line hasn’t changed in all the work I’ve done on embodiment because that’s why I was drawn to that line of intellectual inquiry from the beginning.

SKO: What are some of the specific cross over issues from the BPCQ article that you believe are awaiting translation by another entrepreneurial scholar into RHM research?

LM: Orienting is such a lovely word, and particularly the extended and nuanced ways that Ahmed uses it. I really didn’t do her work justice when I used it, but at the same time, she may appreciate bringing this term and it’s many layers and nuances into different fields. For RHM, orienting intersects with something that I’ve briefly written about and am writing about in a larger project, and that is, context. Even though RHM scholars and rhetoric scholars in general have long understood the importance of context, I’ve written recently that RHM has a context problem, which means we need to consider in more nuanced and specific ways the contexts of use for health and medical information and communication. Orienting is a key starting place on understanding the contexts that impact how health and medical information is designed, but more importantly, used.

Orienting is also a key term that folks in RHM should think through in terms of their own relationship to their research practices. Many scholars come to RHM through some sort of personal connection to the subject either personally or through someone that they know. While these connections can bring with it important insights, RHM has not begun to think through what these sorts of connections mean methodologically. At RHM the journal, we’re working on starting this conversation through developing a dialogue around the issue, but this is an area that has great potential, particularly through this concept of orienting.

SKO: Working from Ahmed’s theories, you not only develop your theory of orientation for the classroom but you also interpret it for the contexts of disability and access. What applications do you see for your theory of “orienting access” in your future work in RHM?

LM: RHM scholarship has always had a pretty close connection with disability studies. In the project I’m editing (with some great folks: Rhetoric of Health and Medicine As/Is), we have a section on the relationships between RHM and other areas. One of those essays focuses on the connection to disability studies. Access (like orienting) has such great potential to employ in RHM because access gets played out in so many ways. Beyond the important work of access from a more traditional viewpoint for those with disabilities, access to care is a huge issue and problem that move across different populations and communities. Access is connected to race, class, gender orientation, cultural issues, and literacy so there is so much potential for and in RHM. The great thing about a new field like RHM is that the possibilities

are so great not only from a scholarly research perspective but the potential to put the work into practice in localized situations is one of the reasons I have worked in this area.

SKO: As we wrap up, could you provide your wide-ranging view of how Sara Ahmed's work is relevant for some of the primary research questions facing the field of RHM at this time? What possibilities can you outline tentatively?

LM: As I suggested above, Ahmed's work on orientation has much potential for RHM from a number of perspectives. But if I'm thinking through all of Ahmed's work, I would suggest that there are four potential avenues that RHM scholars could pursue.

First, Ahmed's work as seen in the *Cultural Politics of Emotion* could be used to better understand experiences of patients, caregivers, health care providers, and other stakeholders in health and medicine. RHM scholars are starting to explore the senses (Meloncon, 2018), which is directly connected to emotions and embodiment. I can see a fruitful conversation between Ahmed's work and questions around the sensorium, different types of embodiment, the stigma of emotions, and a number of other questions about what emotions do within healthcare encounters.

Second, building on the idea above about orienting, Ahmed's actually adds the terms "objects" and "others" to the title. Those two terms in conjunction with orientation offers RHM much potential. While RHM scholars have focused on new materialism and materialist rhetoric, Ahmed's use of objects is different because she uses and views objects as a way to understand orientation and otherness. This particular move is vital for RHM scholarship to understand the many instances of "objects" and "others" and "orientation" that pervade the health care complex.

Third, RHM scholarship needs to move in practical directions around policy work. While scholars often claim that their findings can influence practice, often times that influence is done in limited and local ways. I am not at all critiquing that important work. But what I am saying is that examining policies is a way that can have broader impact. Health communication scholars have done this to a degree so its important that RHM scholars—not everyone of course but we do need to nurture some scholars in applied work—enter into policy debates. The concepts in Ahmed's *On Being Included* can help scholars situate an approach on how to critique and then potentially implement policies in action.

Finally, current RHM scholars have engaged with and used much work from feminist theories and methodologies, but Ahmed's latest work, *Living a Feminist Life*, has a focus on the everyday experiences of being a feminist and the idea of complaint. Since patients become patients because they have a "complaint," Ahmed's work suggests a ripe avenue of research around what a feminist version of complaint may look like in RHM and what that version may mean for patients and their families.

Moreover, this stark attention to feminist theory can also expose areas within healthcare where a rhetorical approach can provide insights into how to provide better care. In particular, feminist theory at work in the Ahmed lays out can help with the growing number of field based projects or community based projects by providing researchers a different way of seeing the research site.

RHM is a broad and diverse field that at this moment doesn't have set boundaries, which is a good thing. At the moment, the field is bound by its connections to rhetoric and rhetorical theory and its methodologies (see Meloncon and Scott, 2018). But in more practical terms, what binds RHM together is its attention to the experiences of people. So as I approach thinking through any research question or themes of research that RHM scholars should pursue, it all comes back to how can we better understand the variety of lived experiences. And that's really what Ahmed's work is about.

SKO: Thank you for sharing your reading of Ahmed and your vision for how her theory can be a useful lens for exploring the problems we are presently trying to tackle in the rhetorical fields of health and medicine.

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