



AALBORG UNIVERSITY
DENMARK

Aalborg Universitet

Intercultural alternatives

Two Nordic books on intercultural communication

Tange, Hanne

Published in:
Hermes

Publication date:
2009

Document Version
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication from Aalborg University](#)

Citation for published version (APA):
Tange, H. (2009). Intercultural alternatives: Two Nordic books on intercultural communication. *Hermes*, 42, 233-249.

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal -

Take down policy

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us at vbn@aub.aau.dk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

*Hanne Tange**

Intercultural Alternatives – two Nordic Books on Intercultural Communication¹

Abstract

The article compares two recent Nordic anthologies on intercultural communication. One volume, Askehave/Norlyk's *Meanings and Messages* (2006) addresses the topic from a specific, business-oriented viewpoint, whereas the second collection, Dahl et al.'s *Bridges of Understanding* (2006) builds on a broader definition of the subject. This reflects on the contents, with the former relying on business as a central point of reference, while the latter highlights theoretical differences and interdisciplinarity. The review assesses the books in relation to the teaching of intercultural communication, discussing editorial aims, theoretical outlook, approach to culture, and accessibility. It concludes that the books are important because of the way they attempt to communicate Nordic research, but also that they do not quite meet the requirements that this reader makes from course literature in intercultural communication.

1. Is there a Nordic tradition of intercultural communication research?

Intercultural communication, in its very name, connotes intermediality – that is, a position situated somewhere between different cultural perspectives, contexts, and histories. Back in 2004, Blasco/Gustafsson sent out an essay collection titled *Intercultural Alternatives: Critical Perspectives on Intercultural Encounters in Theory and Practice*, in

1 Askehave, Inger/Norlyk, Birgit (eds.) 2006: *Meanings and Messages: intercultural business communication*. Århus: Academica. ISBN-10 87-7675-212-7.

Dahl, Øyvind/Jensen, Iben/Nynäs, Peter (eds.) 2006: *Bridges of Understanding: Perspectives on Intercultural Communication*. Oslo: Oslo Academic Press. ISBN 82-7477-269-5.

* *Hanne Tange*
Aarhus School of Business, Aarhus University
Department of Language and Business Communication
Fuglesangs Allé 4
DK-8210 Aarhus V
hta@asb.dk

which they invited scholars to engage critically with a discipline which in many business schools had been reduced to quantitative surveys and Hofstedian accounts of national character. The current discussion has been named from this anthology because Blasco/Gustafsson's insistence on multidisciplinary foreshadows the editorial philosophy behind *Meanings and Messages* (Askehave/Norlyk 2006) and *Bridges of Understanding* (Dahl et al. 2006), two recent books on intercultural communication and the focal point of this review article. It may therefore be appropriate to begin by asking whether indeed there is such a thing as a distinctively Nordic tradition of intercultural communication research?

As Dahl's introduction to *Bridges of Understanding* (2006) illustrates, Nordic researchers often define their work in opposition to the hegemony of the American functionalist paradigm, using the theoretical positions of semiotics, social constructionism, critical hermeneutics and poststructuralism to challenge the notions of absolute cultural values and differences. Until recently, this discussion has primarily been conducted in academic circles, leaving teachers of intercultural communication with few alternatives to American textbooks such as Varner/Beamer, *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace* (2005), and Gudykunst/Kim, *Communicating with Strangers* (2003). However, with the publication of Dahl et al.'s *Bridges of Understanding* (2006), and Askehave/Norlyk's *Meanings and Messages* (2006), attempts have been made to explain Nordic research to student audiences (high school and university, language and business), and this is a very welcome development.

The current review compares Askehave/Norlyk, *Meanings and Messages: intercultural business communication* (Copenhagen 2006) and Dahl et al., *Bridges of Understanding: Perspectives on Intercultural Communication* (Oslo 2006). In both volumes the editors state their ambition to introduce new critical perspectives into the field of intercultural communication, which will be taken into account in the assessment of their efforts. Since the anthologies are recommended for university students of intercultural communication, I shall read them from a lecturer's point of view, asking to what extent they meet the requirements I make of course literature.

2. Why teaching is at the heart of this

Before outlining the four questions that constitute the main part of the discussion, I should like to reflect briefly on the role of the lecturer in developing cultural awareness and understanding among the students of intercultural communication. This discussion is prompted by Blasco's chapter on "Business students and culture" (Askehave/Norlyk 2006), which presents very clearly the dilemma that university teachers confront when attempting to convey to students the complexities of contemporary cultural theory. For even when they happily engage in critical debates during class hours, international management and language students request practical guidelines at the end of the day, and if the teacher does not deliver on this, they will look elsewhere for a toolbox on intercultural relations. As a result, one of the most frequently quoted sources in student papers is *www.geert-hofstede.com* – an open-access webpage providing a neatly packaged theory on cultural differences, which is easily downloaded and reproduced.

Blasco ascribes the popularity of functionalist toolboxes to student pragmatics. An in-depth study of culture requires a range of political, economic, and sociological sources about the country, region or organisation under scrutiny, and many students will choose to save time by using Hofstede "to 'fill in' the cultural part of the analysis" (Blasco, in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 191). Accordingly, many student essays take the form of a comparison between different national cultures ("China and Denmark" springs to mind), with the authors looking for cultural behaviours and traits that confirm the statistics they have found on the Hofstede webpage. But is this really what intercultural communication is about? Some students would agree since it offers a simple way of passing exams, which for many is the principal reason for participating in courses on culture. However, even if business students find cultural issues hard to grasp, they are by no means unaware of the problems in using a functionalist approach. Blasco (Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 186) quotes from one of her interviews:

It is extremely frustrating attending classes where culture is still introduced as 'the software of the mind' and Hofstede's dimensions [are] used uncritically to 'predict' behaviour ... Frustrating to the point that the discussion is not even worth taking in that particular class.

Blasco's observations suggest that business students are able to read and discuss complex accounts of culture and that it is unfair to blame the current predominance of the Hofstede paradigm on the students' capacity. Yet she also stresses that students require assistance from their lecturers in order to apply cultural theories to their present and (expected) future practice. The main purpose of courses in intercultural communication should be practice-oriented, in other words, allowing business students to abridge the gap between the universal concepts encountered in their reading and the specific situations confronted in the workplace (Blasco, in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 198).

Once again, this highlights the importance of quality teaching materials. Ideally, a good introduction to intercultural communication includes a variety of critical as well as thematic approaches - from cultural translation to international negotiation and expatriation - addressing the topics in a manner that challenges the reader's presumptions rather than consolidates his/her pre-understanding of culture as a barrier to be overcome in business. In addition, the course reading should offer a combination of theory and practice, supplementing abstract interpretations of culture with illustrations of how such concepts manifest themselves in specific business situations. Yet it is important to realise that not any case will do. Students of international business have happily admitted to skipping the constructed examples used in their textbook (in this case Varner/Beamer 2005) because they did not strike them as real-life situations. In comparison, they respond positively to empirical studies (e.g. Marschan-Piekkari et al. 1999, Djursaa 1995), using such sources to explain why cultural awareness matters. In their selection of teaching materials and methodology, lecturers are therefore responsible for the attitudes students acquire towards cultural issues, which is my motivation for placing teaching at the centre of the present discussion.

3. Four questions

The next section introduces the four questions that will be explored in relation to the two anthologies. They are: *what is the aim of the book; what theoretical perspectives are included; is the focus on practical guidelines or cultural practice; and does the book encourage prescription, description or critical reflection?*

The first question of *aims* is essential as it allows for a consideration of the editors' stated intentions in relation to the actual form and contents of the books. In the case of anthologies, this is particularly important since the overall purpose may be undermined by contributions pointing in different theoretical and/or thematic directions. One way to avoid inconsistency is to emphasise the multidisciplinary nature of the book, which is the strategy chosen by Dahl et al., who in their preface mention "[s]everal approaches to intercultural communication" and a "trans-disciplinary combination of different theories, methods, and approaches" (Dahl et al. 2006: 3-4). In contrast, Askehave/Norlyk (2006: 6) select a common point of reference – "a Danish business context" – which is explored from various thematic positions.

The second question of *theoretical perspectives* asks what cultural theories are represented in the books, and how individual authors engage with them. With reference to this, Dahl (Dahl et al. 2006: 7) stresses the diversity of theoretical approaches available within the field of intercultural communication, which he ascribes to the attraction of the discipline to "theorists and practitioners with diverse professional backgrounds such as anthropology, ethnography, sociology, psychology, linguistics, history, political science, religion, theology, philosophy, and health care". Askehave/Norlyk, on the other hand, concentrate on two theoretical positions – namely, the functionalist paradigm of Hofstede and Hall versus the interpretive method of Geertz and Gadamer.

The third question – *practical guidelines or cultural practice* – was prompted by the introduction to *Meanings and Messages*, which in the section on functionalism highlights the "user-friendly" nature of this approach, which "provides business people and students with a range of practical tools for intercultural communication" (Askehave et al., in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 10). In the light of Blasco's comments on business students' theoretical preferences, this statement is interesting since it suggests a fundamental opposition between a functionalist concern with practical guidelines and the more practice-oriented research one finds within the adjacent disciplines of anthropology, sociology, and Cultural Studies.

The final question – *prescription, description or critical reflection?* – asks what kind of reading position the two anthologies request from a student audience. *Bridges of Understanding* is characterised as a "sup-

plementary text-book for Master students” with some knowledge of intercultural communication (Dahl et al. 2006: 3), which encourages the reader to look for a sophisticated treatment of cultural concepts and themes. In comparison, *Meanings and Messages* is presented as an introduction to culture, communication and business and will be assessed with reference to BA and Bsc. students. Yet I should like to stress that the question of prescription versus reflection does not relate to students’ academic level, but represents a conscious choice of approach to the study of intercultural communication.

Having outlined the basic structure of the review, I shall now address the four questions in relation to the two anthologies. However, any general comments and comparisons will be postponed to the end of the discussion.

3.1. What is the aim of the book?

In their preface, Askehave and Norlyk (2006: 6) declare the purpose of *Meanings and Messages* to be “to provide teachers and students with an updated tool to describe and understand the complexities of intercultural business communication”. To meet this aim, they have invited researchers from business schools and universities to present cases of relevance to Danish students and professionals “within the field of language and intercultural communication” (quoted from the back cover), which has resulted in a collection of essays on a variety of themes such as marketing (Norlyk, Gram), translation studies (Zethsen), written and oral communication (Djursaa, Nielsen), education (Blasco), and internationalisation (Blenker and Christensen). There does not appear to be any particular logic to the progression or selection of topics – except that all chapters use Danish examples to address cultural questions that language and communication professionals may have to confront at some stage in their career.

For the sake of the present argument, one might want to dwell on the editors’ claim to present an “updated” approach to intercultural communication. For what exactly constitutes a “new and updated” perspective? In terms of cultural theory, the introduction contrasts the functionalist positions of Hofstede and Hall to the interpretive philosophy of Geertz. A similar juxtaposition of theoretical opposites can be found in several chapters, suggesting an eagerness among the authors to high-

light the importance of Geertz and Gadamer to intercultural business communication (e. g. Askehave, Gram, and Strunck). It is not my intention to question the relevance of the functionalist and interpretive paradigms, which have had a profound impact on intercultural communication since the emergence of the discipline in the post-war period. Yet I fail to see how one can possibly regard Geertz' "webs of significance" (Askehave et al., in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 19) as an updated approach, given that *The Interpretation of Culture* was published in 1973 and thus predates Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences* by seven years. From a book that promises new perspectives on culture and communication, one might have expected an engagement with the more contemporary, critical theories that have developed within the disciplines of discourse analysis (Fairclough), Cultural Studies (Stuart Hall, du Gay), and sociolinguistics (Blommaert), but the only area of intercultural communication that appears to have been updated in *Meanings and Messages* is that of communication media - with chapters devoted to internet and e-mail correspondence.

The editors of *Bridges of Understanding* share Askehave/Norlyk's ambition to present new and different approaches to intercultural communication. Their scope is somewhat broader, looking beyond the relatively narrow field of business to areas such as education (Johannesen, Skeie), health care (Hanssen, Berbyuk et al.), public institutions (Gotaas), peace-keeping (Lode/Nynäs) and mediation (Opsal). The result is a more uneven collection, containing a somewhat random selection of contemporary Nordic research. In his introduction, Dahl (Dahl et al. 2006: 7) sums up the anthology in the following words:

The study of intercultural communication is by definition a multi-disciplinary area of study. In this anthology, researchers from the Nordic countries with different experience try to give some answers to the following question: How can different approaches help us in the construction of new bridges of understanding in intercultural communication?

The editors state as a key concern their wish to present the diversity of perspectives available within the academic discipline of intercultural communication. In the preface, the example of critical hermeneutical research is used to illustrate how Nordic researchers challenge the functionalist paradigm, which prompts the editors to stress the open-minded, trans-disciplinary nature of the book (Dahl et al. 2006: 3-4). From

the start, *Bridges of Understanding* thus encourages its reader to look beyond the either-or distinction between a functionalist and an interpretive framework, evaluating cultural theories on the basis of the knowledge that they produce about particular cultural practices and relationships. The advantage of such flexibility is that the anthology is able to meet the promise of diversity – with the theoretical preferences of individual authors ranging from the critical hermeneutical stance of Nynäs and Svane to the more conventional, functionalist position of Svennevig and Isaksson. Yet one suspects that diversity has been promoted at the expense of consistency, and the reader occasionally lacks an overall sense of cohesion. One is tempted to recommend to students that they concentrate on one or two essays at the time, but of course such a reading strategy might limit their experience of theoretical and methodological variety.

A second purpose of the anthology is to abridge the gap between scholars within and outside the Baltic region by making Nordic research available in English (Dahl et al. 2006: 3). Several contributors (e.g. Dahl 2003, Jensen 1998, Nynäs 2001) have already published monographs on intercultural relations, but as they are written in the authors' native languages, they are rarely read outside Scandinavia. With *Bridges of Understanding*, the editors have attempted to tell the world about current trends in Nordic intercultural communication research, highlighting the existence of this European alternative to North American research.

3.2. What theoretical perspectives are included?

To answer the second question, one might look at the way different theoretical perspectives are represented in the two anthologies. The discussion starts with some general observations and then proceeds to a closer examination of sample chapters from the two collections.

The theoretical foundation of *Meanings and Messages* is the distinction between a functionalist and an interpretive approach outlined in the first chapter (Askehave et al.). In their chapters, most contributors refer to at least one of these paradigms, while some choose to reproduce the initial opposition, contrasting the “mainstream” positions of Hofstede and Hall to the “alternative”, interpretive perspective (Gram, in Askehave/Norlyk 2006). Occasionally, this results in some awkward discus-

sions of the theory. In chapters such as Strunck's "Politeness in French and Danish e-mails" and Gram's "B2B websites in an intercultural perspective," this reader thus finds that the theoretical framework presupposed by the authors does not really connect with the communication media and practices examined in the analysis.

A comparison between Gram's analysis of B2B websites and Norlyk's account of the Morsø case may illustrate this. Both focus on cross-cultural marketing, which makes them comparable in terms of scope and outlook. Yet the authors handle cultural theory very differently, and, arguably, this explains the relative strengths and weaknesses of the two pieces. On the one hand, Gram seems heavily influenced by the anthology's functionalist-interpretive dichotomy. Following some ten pages of description, she turns to her theoretical reflections in the section "Culture on websites", but the reader expecting a discussion linked to the example of websites is disappointed. For rather than engage with contemporary theory in areas such as visual communications and reception analysis, Gram summarises previous applications of Hofstede and Hall to corporate websites before concluding that the internet is dynamic and requires an interpretive approach (Gram, in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 145). At this stage, one would appreciate an in-depth examination of the interpretive method in relation to webpage analysis, but is referred to a communication model (Gram, in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 146). As a result, Gram's section 7.6 reads as an appendix, included mainly "to fill in" a theoretical gap (Blasco, in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 191). In comparison, Norlyk's account of the Morsø case comes across as a coherent piece, which shows the relevance of the chosen theories to the phenomenon of localisation. Unlike Gram, Norlyk does not waste much time on the functionalist-interpretive distinction, which allows for a more focussed discussion. The text explores the particular circumstances in the Danish, British, Swedish and Norwegian markets, highlighting to the reader the need for contextual knowledge when working across cultural boundaries.

In contrast, *Bridges of Understanding* makes no attempt to establish a common theoretical framework. The editors' initial reference to "an alternative and supplementary approach to the dominant functionalist trend within communication research" (Dahl et al. 2006: 3) leads the reader to suspect an element of conceptual polarisation, but this is removed once we move further into the anthology. In each of the nine-

teen chapters, one encounters a new perspective – developed with reference to specific intercultural communication situations – and even if some cultural theories feature more prominently than others (e.g. critical hermeneutics), no single paradigm is favoured above the rest. In consequence, the book comes across as very open in terms of its theoretical scope, inviting the reader to assess the relative strengths and weaknesses of different approaches to culture.

In terms of structure, *Bridges of Understanding* encourages the reader to compare contributions on similar theoretical and thematic subjects. There are several essays on critical hermeneutics (Nynäs and Svane), health care (Hanssen, and Berbyuk et al.), education (Johannessen, Skeie, Holmen), and international business (Isolatus, Svennevig/Isaksson), which is helpful to students looking for examples of how various theoretical approaches and interpretations may work. One case in point is the contrasting positions presented in the two chapters on international business. On the one hand, Svennevig/Isaksson examine the subject of cultural adaptation with reference to the situation of the Nordic Baltic Beverages Holding in the post-Soviet countries. Their argument relies on the functionalist paradigm of Hofstede, which inspires the authors to explain differences in cultural practice and behaviour in relation to the dimensions of power distance, individualism/collectivism, and masculinity/femininity. The discussion provides little information about local political, economic and social conditions and may be characterised as an example of the etic approach – that is, a study of culture from the outside. In comparison, Isolatus employs an emic perspective, using qualitative research interviews and participant observations to write an insider account of the Mexican workplace. The scope of her study is somewhat limited compared to Svennevig/Isaksson, but her ethnographic method allows for detailed, “thick” descriptions, explaining, among other things, how the non-native fieldworker learns to behave and dress in the manner of her Mexican respondents (Isolatus, in Dahl et al. 2006: 237). When read together, the two chapters illustrate how the choice of a certain research position influences the authors’ interpretation of intercultural communication situations, which is useful in a teaching context.

3.3. Practical guidelines or cultural practice?

As mentioned in section 3, the question of practical guidelines versus cultural practice was inspired by Askehave et al.'s introduction to *Meanings and Messages*. However, since it constitutes the focal point of the present section, the editors' statement may be worth repeating here:

From a practical business point of view, one of the strong points of functionalist theory lies in its highly operative and pragmatic nature. In a sense, the traditional functionalist approach can be described as very user-friendly, as it provides business people and students with a range of practical tools for intercultural communication. (Askehave et al., in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 10)

The paragraph brings to mind the BA and Bsc. students, who may set out with ambitious ideas about intercultural relations and yet end up using functionalist paradigms because they are so readily available. This student behaviour is encouraged in *Meanings and Messages* where the editors choose to stress the "user-friendly" and "practical" nature of such cultural toolboxes. In comparison, the interpretive method of Geertz and Gadamer comes across as an awkward, difficult approach, which may discourage some students from engaging with cultural interpretation and meaning making processes. The first paragraph of section 1.8. – "The interpretive approach" – reads:

The interpretive challenger to the functionalist approach sees culture as a meaning system which people produce and use to make sense of the world around them. Rather than placing a particular culture on a scale from high to low power distance, by way of example, the interpretive approach focuses on the importance of individual interpretations and meaning systems in intercultural communication. (Askehave et al., in Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 17)

Unlike the first quotation, this passage promises no practical guidelines to the pragmatic students of international business. From a student's point of view, one might thus ask why it should be necessary to invest a lot of effort in the understanding of complex cultural theories, when a ready-made solution has already been provided in the form of Hofstede. Even if this is unintentional, *Meanings and Messages* appears to predispose the reader towards a functionalist paradigm, which is unfortunate given the editors' ambition to broaden the theoretical basis for intercultural business communication.

Although the anthology tends to favour practical guidelines to cultural practice, there are notable exceptions. The previous section referred to the chapter by Norlyk, which contains a fine examination of the local strategies emerging in response to conditions in particular European markets, but also Djursaa and Nielsen adopt a more practice-oriented approach. As a consequence, they take as their point of departure a specific cultural behaviour – an English “no” or a Grundfos sales letter – which they seek to explain with reference to more general theories on culture and communication. The results are two interesting case studies, which demonstrate the value of in-depth knowledge to cultural analysis.

If *Meanings and Messages* attempts to offer practical guidelines as well as cultural practice, *Bridges of Understanding* clearly promotes practice-oriented research. Most contributors found their discussion on empirical studies, identifying cultural behaviours and traits that enable them to make a specific theoretical or methodological point (e. g. Hansen, Gootas, and Opsal). Jensen chooses to take this one step further, arguing for the possible contribution of practice theory to understanding power relations in intercultural communication. Jensen (Dahl et al. 2006: 92) favours a complex idea of “practice,” emphasising that each communication situation must be analysed in relation to a set of culturally specific routines:

The job interview is an excellent example of a social practice. A job interview consists of several interconnected elements: Body activities; shaking hands, taking a seat, using body language; mental activities; presenting and positioning oneself in an appropriate way in relation to existing discourses of, for example, gender or ethnicity.

The practice researchers are at their best when denouncing the stereotypical images of culture produced by the functionalists. In his introduction, Dahl (Dahl et al. 2006: 17) contrasts the discursive and bodily routines of practice theory to Hofstede’s “software of the mind,” whereas Jensen seems more concerned with deconstructing earlier research paradigms than explaining how exactly her own approach adds to our knowledge about intercultural relations. As a result, *Bridges of Understanding* occasionally leaves the reader wondering how to convince the pragmatic students of international business about the value of practice-oriented research.

The best attempt to abridge this gap is Johannessen's study of an intercultural conflict in a Norwegian primary school. This begins with a specific communication situation, explaining in some detail the cultural backgrounds and behaviours of the main actors, but gradually, the examination of practice becomes intertwined with a theoretical discussion, underlining the influence of a social constructionist perspective on the way the teacher approaches the matter. As a result, Johannessen manages to present social constructionism as part of a pragmatic strategy for resolving cultural misunderstandings, encouraging the reader to look at the particular circumstances of a communication event before ascribing a disagreement or miscommunication to culture. Similar recommendations are made by Opstal and Lode/Nynäs, whose chapters highlight the need to focus on cultural likenesses rather than differences when working in the areas of intercultural mediation and peace-keeping.

3.4. Prescription, description – or critical engagement?

Prior to my consideration of the final topic, I should like to explain the difference between a prescriptive, a descriptive, and a critical approach to intercultural communication. A prescriptive text tries to predict cultural behaviour. A typical example is the "how to do business in X country" books, which will outline the do's and don'ts of particular cultures, but provide little explanation of why this is so. A descriptive text is more elaborate and could take the form of a case study. Cultural theories relevant to the problem will be introduced in the course of the discussion, enabling the reader to understand why the involved parties went for a specific solution. In comparison, a critical text tends to be open-ended. It often suggests more than one perspective on a given topic, leaving no clear-cut answers at the end. This makes the reading challenging to students, who will have to work out their own solutions to an intercultural conflict. Yet this should be regarded as an important part of students' learning process, inviting them to reflect critically on intercultural encounters instead of passively reproducing textbook knowledge.

Having stated my own preferences, I believe that one of the reasons why I occasionally found *Meanings and Messages* a hard book to read is the "user-friendly" format, which means that the main flow of the argument is broken by fact boxes, models, and discussion exercises. This

seems to suggest that student readers are not capable of processing information presented in the traditional form of a research paper, which is not confirmed by my experience of teaching intercultural communication to BA and Bsc classes. Indeed, I fear that some students might be put off by the somewhat patronising style of Askehave (Askehave/Norlyk 2006: 33):

Let me warn you! This chapter does *not* provide you with “five easy steps to successful communication”. The reason is that your choice of communication strategy differs immensely depending on whether you are talking to your grandmother, your teacher, the newly arrived exchange student or the charming Greek waiter. This makes it very difficult – if not impossible – to provide you with advice on how to communicate successfully in any situation you may come across.

If we want to improve students’ ability to understand and work with complex cultural themes, it is vital to address them as intelligent learners and not as empty vessels to be filled with whatever knowledge the author happens to regard as appropriate to their level of study. Which brings me to one of the basic problems in using textbooks such as *Meanings and Messages*. For when researchers are asked to translate their results into a student-friendly format, they tend to adopt a descriptive or prescriptive approach, believing perhaps that this is more accessible to the uninformed reader. Accordingly, they will include neat models and lists of cultural variation in order to guide students through their topic, but often this writing strategy causes them to outline the answers to culture as well as the questions. When nothing is left to chance, students have little cause for reflection, and in the long run, this could prove detrimental to their learning process.

From this perspective, *Bridges of Understanding* works better because it requests an involvement from the reader, who is asked to choose amongst the multitude of interpretations available within intercultural communication. However, as in the case of *Meanings and Messages*, some contributions stand out. Section 3.2 discussed Isolatus’ reflection on her fieldwork in Mexico, which shows what kind of knowledge that can be obtained through an insider perspective, but also the chapters by Dahl, Nynäs and Svane contain useful introductions to different aspects of cultural theory. Dahl compares a range of theoretical perspectives, positioning *Bridges of Understandings* in relation to the North American tradition of functionalist, prescriptive research. To students unfamiliar

with the schools in intercultural communication research, this outline can be recommended, even if one would have liked a more balanced discussion, which included the relative strengths of functionalism vis-à-vis the weaknesses of social constructionism, hermeneutics, poststructuralism, and practice theory. The two pieces by Nynäs and Svane are interesting because of the way they demonstrate the relevance of a single theoretical paradigm – critical hermeneutics – to the study of intercultural communication. Instead of vague references to meaning-making processes, the authors use the particular elements of estrangement/identification (Nynäs) and social, structures/cultural life worlds (Svane) to analyse intercultural encounters from the position of the individual-in-interaction (Svane). Although they ultimately leave the reader to make up his/her own mind, they offer some tools for cultural analysis, providing a starting point for the students wanting to work with interpretive theory and methodology. Nynäs (Dahl et al. 2006: 23) observes on the open-ended nature of a critical hermeneutical approach:

I emphasise in particular that cultural borders are neither measurable nor definitive, but rather an integral part of human interpretive processes. Differences are constructed, transformed, and deconstructed in a dynamic way, as part of evolving communication events. This implies that intercultural communication, just as communication in general, always means a balance between understanding, misunderstanding, and a lack of understanding.

In classes on intercultural communication, I should like to see a similar balance between understanding, misunderstanding, and a lack of understanding. For the things that make us wonder, are those that we cannot understand, and textbooks prescribing ready-made solutions to cultural dilemmas may therefore cause a closing rather than an opening of the students' minds.

4. Conclusion

The discussion started out by welcoming the editors' initiative in bringing forth two anthologies on intercultural communication written from a Nordic point of view. At this stage, one should have liked to conclude that the books have made the task as a lecturer and researcher in intercultural relations an easier one, but I am afraid that this is not really the case. There are fine chapters in both collections, which will be added

to the pool of material I draw on when compiling BA and Bsc. courses on cultural themes. Yet this reader cannot help but wonder whether this is really the best Nordic researchers can achieve in intercultural communication?

The sections above have discussed such problems as theoretical understanding, use of empirical data, and accessibility to student readers with reference to specific contributions, and these points will not be taken any further. Instead, I should like to elaborate briefly on the sense of randomness that struck me when reading the two anthologies. One reason for this is language, for ever so often the reading experience is disrupted by awkward expressions, grammatical mistakes or indeed spelling errors. In future, the editors might therefore want to consider the provision of language support to authors who are not professional users of English. A more serious objection is the somewhat uneven nature of the contributions. Both volumes contain some very thin analyses, which makes the reader wonder whether the principal criterion for inclusion has been personal connections rather than research quality. One way to resolve this apparent lack of cohesion might have been to include an initial statement in which the editors explain how exactly the pieces are meant to fit together.

Yet the anthologies have strengths as well as weaknesses. The sections above dwelled on the chapters by Blasco and Norlyk in *Meanings and Messages* because of the way the authors addressed cultural topics, and these can be recommended to students working on similar themes. In addition, one may appreciate the decision by Askehave and Norlyk to present Danish cases, which enables students with little intercultural experience to start on familiar cultural ground. Similarly, the trans-disciplinary framework of *Bridges of Understanding* points to a more open-minded understanding of intercultural communication. Readers are encouraged to look beyond the narrow functionalism of American-produced textbooks, exploring alternative views on similar kinds of communication situations. The editors of *Bridges of Understanding* should also be applauded for their attempt to provide a logical structure to the anthology. Given the disparate nature of the contributions, this is no mean task, and yet one experiences a sense of progression from the cultural theory in the early chapters to the thematic orientation of the second part.

To conclude, the past discussion has compared what may be characterised as two mixed bags of sweets. Each anthology contains some good pieces, and yet one cannot help but feel slightly cheated – in spite of the potentials of the theme neither book really manages to deliver on the editorial promise of new and different perspectives. As a result, the collections should be regarded as supplementary to existing literature and not a lot more than that. One can hope that such publications will inspire other authors, and that we will see in future new books that can communicate to students the diversity of quality research undertaken by Nordic scholars within the field of intercultural communication. Only then may we break the functionalist spell, convincing pragmatic business students that the take-away theories available on the internet cannot replace an in-depth knowledge acquired through the careful study of a specific cultural region, organisation, or community.

5. References

- Blasco, Maribel/Gustafsson, Jan (eds.) 2004: *Intercultural Alternatives: Critical Perspectives on Intercultural Encounters in Theory and Practice*. Copenhagen: Copenhagen Business School Press.
- Dahl, Øyvind 2001: *Møter mellom mennesker: Interkulturell Kommunikasjon*. Oslo: Gyldendal.
- Djursaa, Malene 1995: Getting to a No: A Matter of English Ethics or Culture? In *Business Ethics* 4, 1, 1-5.
- Gudykunst, William B./Kim, Young Yun 2003: *Communicating with strangers: an approach to intercultural communication*. Boston MA etc.: McGraw-Hill Irwin.
- Jensen, Iben 1998: *Interkulturel kommunikation i komplekse samfund*. Roskilde: Roskilde Universitetsforlag.
- Marschan-Piekkari, Rebecca/Welch, Denise/Welch, Lawrence 1999: In the shadow: the impact of language on structure, power, and communication in the multinational. In *International Business Review* 8, 421-40.
- Nynäs, Peter 2001: *Bakom Guds rygg. En hermeneutisk ansats till interkulturell kommunikation och förståelse i industriella projekt*. Turku/Åbo: Åbo Akademis förlag.
- Varner, Iris/Beamer, Linda 2005: *Intercultural Communication in the Global Workplace*. Boston MA etc.: McGraw-Hill Irwin.

