

Discourse Community as a Concept

Historically, the concept of discourse community emerges from Foucault's (1972) "discursive formations," Stanley Fish's (1980) "interpretive communities," and the sociolinguistic concept of "speech communities." Pat Bizzell (1992) describes a "discourse community" as a group of people who share certain language-using practices" (p 1). Their community practices are "conventionalized" in stylistic conventions and canonical knowledge. James Porter (1986) describes a discourse community as "a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated." (p. 38-39)

In his book *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, John Swales (1990) defines the concept of discourse community--as distinct from the sociolinguistic concept of speech community--to focus on the role of writer rather than speaker.

Swales outlines characteristics of a discourse community as having:

1. common goals
2. participatory mechanisms
3. communication exchange
4. community specific genres
5. specialized terminology
6. generalized expertise

Note: Swales points out that many arguments that a classroom is not a discourse community could be valid. He presents the concept of a sociorhetorical discourse community as one that accounts for groups of people who gather to pursue "objectives prior to those of socialization or solidarity" (p. 471).

Relevance to the Writing Classroom

As scholars and teachers of writing, "discourse communities:"

- re-conceptualizes speech community, a sociolinguistic concept, for a writing community for those interested in studying written discourse.
- reflects a social view of language and emphasizes genres as they emerge from and are meaningful within specific discourse communities--a contrast to any modern perspective of language as transparent or universal as presented through current-traditional composition pedagogy.
- theorizes why some students, especially those whose backgrounds do not reflect values that underly academic discourse communities, may struggle to compose in new genres.
- provides a way of contextualizing the kinds of texts students produce in a class and demystifying "academic discourse," revealing instead what kinds of language and genres are valued in academic discourse communities.

For students of writing, “discourse communities:”

- allows them a way into understanding how discourse works in communities they would like to join, professional or social.
- helps students recognize how discourse communities influence language, especially as a way of inviting students to study communities that have influenced their language.
- provides a way of helping student writers recognize contextual features such as audience that influence what and how a text is constructed.

Application in Writing Courses

1. Ethnography of a Discourse Community. (Wardle and Downs, 2011, p.574)

In this assignment, Elizabeth Wardle and Doug Downs ask students to answer the question, “What are the goals and characteristics of this discourse community?” This assignment follows a series of readings (from many scholars also listed in the references below) that introduce students to the concept of discourse communities.

Students choose a discourse community to study ethnographically, observing their activities, language, and texts produced. Students gather data by gathering texts read or produced by the community, making observation notes, and interviewing members of the community. Then they analyze the data to understand their goals, mechanisms for communication, genres, specialized languages, as well as describing any balance between experts and novices. This assignment would lend itself well to a composition class with a research requirement (including primary research as well as secondary with reading theories of discourse communities) and could be delivered as a written analysis, multimodal project, or presentation. This assignment would require guidance, scaffolding, and a substantial time commitment to complete in a first-year composition class.

2. Analysis of Multimodal Texts Produced by Discourse Communities:

This activity is a brief exercise that allows students to look at intertextuality as a way into understanding discourse communities, especially signs through what seems a somewhat disparate community (as in the community of filmmakers).

1. Discuss three similar scenes alluding to a core director’s work. Explain the context of the scenes.
2. Discuss the use of genre.
3. Discuss why the directors have chosen to use intertextuality. Novice/Expert
4. Discuss the creation of a language of discourse through mimicry and re-creation.
5. Have students brainstorm and reflect on discourse communities in their own lives.

References

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