

Laura Wilder
University at Albany, SUNY
Lwilder@albany.edu
IWAC, Session 6H, Friday, June 8, 2012

Is There a Community in this Discourse?

Reasons to Retain the *Discourse Community* Concept

Since Patricia Bizzell's (1982) call to "help poor writers" by explaining "that their writing takes place within a community," the WAC movement has relied heavily on the concept of "discourse community" to explain the rhetorical practices of academic disciplines. Rhetorical explanations of genre tend to hinge on the concept. Carolyn Miller (1984) concludes her influential essay "Genre as Social Action" with the claim that "for the student, genres serve as keys to understanding how to participate in the actions of a community" (p. 165). John Swales (1990) intertwines the concepts by making ownership of genres a defining feature of discourse communities, and Carol Berkenkotter and Thomas Huckin (1995) intertwine them by making ownership by discourse communities a defining feature of genre.

However, calls to abandon the concept have emerged. Compositionists have been justifiably suspicious of characterizations of their work as acculturating first-year college students into "*the academic discourse community*" in light of the growing body of WID research that reveals profound rhetorical differences between not only the humanities and the sciences but also differences at the finer-grained level of disciplines and subspecialties. Its critics have also expressed concern that the discourse community concept, even when treated less monolithically, can be "co-opted" to perform gatekeeping functions by seeing the genre conventions dominant at one moment in a discipline's history as stable standards by which students' performances can be sorted (Cooper, 1989). Another of the recurrent criticisms of the concept is that it suggests too strongly that consensus and unity of purpose are necessary components of discourse

communities (Cooper, 1989; Harris, 1989; Roberts-Miller, 2003). Drawing on Raymond Williams' (1983) definition of "community" in *Keywords*, which claims that the term "seems never to be used unfavourably" (p. 76), Marilyn Cooper (1989) and Joseph Harris (1989) questioned the stability and lack of conflict implied by the term *discourse community*, especially because this runs counter to their perceptions of the discursive interactions of academics and other similarly socially situated writers. Similarly, Paul Prior's (1998) WID research led him to argue against the usefulness of the concept of discourse community because he sees it as being predominantly treated as static and structuralist with little room for agency. According to Prior, "writing researchers have generally conceptualized disciplinarity in basically structuralist terms, seeing discourse communities as abstract, autonomous, spatialized structures of objects and rules, and disciplinary enculturation as transmission of those structures to largely passive novices" (p. 138), whereas his research has led him to see "heterogeneity and particularity more than uniformity and generality" (p. 139).

Seeking to avoid these problems associated with the concept of discourse community, some scholars such as David Russell (1995; Russell & Yañez, 2003) and Anis Bawarshi (2003) have been drawn to theories of networks and activity systems to explain the social action of genres within disciplines. While their applications of these theories have yielded enormously useful insights, my own WID research and teaching has led me to believe that though the discourse-community concept requires some refinement, its explanatory power for researchers and teachers is too great to support abandoning it. Today I will argue for retaining the concept of discourse community despite the criticism it has received, in fact *because* of such criticism. "Discourse community" is a useful term for describing the social and socially constructed fabric of perceived semi-stable connections and common goals that influence and are influenced by the

rhetorical practices of a stratified and increasingly diverse group. The discursive exchanges of its members exist amidst, and because of, unequal configurations of power within the community. The concept of discourse community is useful for describing this phenomenon and, I argue, for helping individuals (including both instructors and students) become aware of their positioning within multiple discourse communities and make informed choices about their rhetorical practices within the constraints of these positions.

A revised concept of *discourse community* thus explicitly acknowledges concerns regarding power dynamics, hierarchy, and gatekeeping precisely because these concerns point to real tendencies that we need to be aware of as instructors, students, and researchers—as those who at times find ourselves in positions to wield power within particular discourse communities and as those who at times also find ourselves alienated at a community’s periphery. An understanding of disciplinary discourse communities as static and impenetrable runs counter to available evidence, which supports an understanding of disciplinary conventions as in flux and capable of being transformed by relative newcomers to the community. The static view also emphasizes acculturation as a process of sorting and excluding rather than informing and including. Undeniably acculturation performs both these functions; however, a number of studies (Herrington, 1985, 1988, 1992; McCarthy, 1987) suggest instructors may have some impact on the degree to which their practices promote either emphasis. Rather than romanticizing community, I believe instructors, researchers, and students are more than capable, as exemplified by the criticism the concept has already received, of marking the ways in which communities exclude as well as include, undercut radical change in favor of a conservative status quo, and reward sweeping changes that alienate members of an old guard. In his reevaluation of the discourse-community concept, Swales (1998) similarly observes that a “functioning” discourse

community need not be congenial, democratic, consensual, or free of prejudice (p. 204). In contrast, *network* and *activity system*, with their mechanistic connotations, would seem to further obscure such darker social aspects of the work of genres.

Another virtue *discourse community* has over proposed alternatives is its pedagogical utility and potential support for transferring students' learning to new contexts. Ann Johns (1997) finds the concept of discourse community particularly useful because students can readily apply the concept; opening discussion with the genres relevant to discourse communities in which they already participate helps students "to grasp the complexity of text production and processing and the importance of understanding the group practices, lexis, values, and controversies that influence the construction of texts" (p. 54) in contexts with which they have less familiarity. Pointing to evidence that "transfer of learning is aided when there is meta-cognitive awareness of overarching principles or schemata which can be applied to new problems" (p. 524), Anne Beaufort (1997) argues that "the notion of discourse community can be a useful heuristic to give to students, along with heuristics such as rhetorical analysis and genre analysis, in order to solve problems when confronted with new writing tasks" (pp. 524–25).

However, a revised understanding of *discourse community* must address criticism that the concept is too vague (Harris, 1989) and seek to resolve some of the radically different ways it has been applied. Definitions of *discourse community* (Bartholomae, 1985; Beaufort, 1997; Devitt, 2004; Freed & Broadhead, 1987; Hyland, 2000; Swales, 1990) often sharply conflict in regard to how tied they are to sociolinguists' concept of a localized "speech community." For instance, though Richard Freed and Glen Broadhead (1987) indicate that a professional discipline such as rhetoric and composition may be a discourse community, they appear to equate the term with *speech community*, and more frequently their examples of discourse

communities are groups who meet regularly face-to-face, such as a single composition class and an accounting firm. Similarly, Amy Devitt (2004) posits that members of discourse communities “must have contact with one another” (p. 40) and “share substantial amounts of time together in common endeavors” (p. 42). For Devitt, being “physically together . . . might be required for the closeness of a community” (p. 44), and thus a professional organization like the Conference on College Composition and Communication or an institutional structure like an English department qualifies as a discourse community. Christopher Thaiss (2001) seems to go even further in this direction, questioning the aptness of labeling “so-called disciplines” as discourse communities when “the proliferation of subspecialties render communication among ‘colleagues’ almost nil” (p. 315). Stressing instead the importance of instructors’ individual and local classroom goals, he proposes that for writing researchers and administrators, a more meaningful concept may be “writing in the course” rather than “writing in the disciplines” (p. 316).

In contrast, Swales (1990) pointedly distinguishes discourse communities from speech communities by highlighting how “literacy takes away locality and parochiality” (p. 24), allowing members to communicate with less-immediate connections in space and time. He further differentiates them by stressing a discourse community’s distinct sociorhetorical characteristics such as its sharing of goals and need to recruit new members. While his later study of the textual life of one university building led Swales (1998) to develop an understanding of “place” discourse communities, whose members “regularly work together” (p. 204) in the same location, it is in “focus” discourse communities that Swales (1998) sees the more “prestigious . . . structurations” (p. 201) occurring. Carolyn Miller’s (1994) concept of rhetorical community builds on Swales’s (1990) understanding of discourse community by proposing that such communities are “virtual rather than material or demographic” (p. 73). By this she means

that such a community is “a discursive projection, a rhetorical construct. . . . the community as invoked, represented, presupposed, or developed in rhetorical discourse” (p. 73). She thus claims rhetoricians have been in error in “looking for community demographically and geographically—in classrooms, civic task forces, hobby groups, academic conferences” (p. 74).

These differing conceptions of discourse community have influenced writing research, encouraging, for instance, researchers to describe a particular classroom as either a discourse community unto itself or as a scene relevant to the exploration of a larger disciplinary community. They have also similarly influenced pedagogical and curricular decisions, encouraging instructors to see establishing a discourse community within their writing classroom as a goal or to see preparing students for entering a larger, already established discourse community as a goal. Although Swales and Miller’s “virtual” understanding requires some refinement, an understanding of disciplinary discourse communities as overarching discursive projections and rhetorical constructs that members use to conceptually understand and link their activities is greatly useful. We need to understand both the conceptual projections of discipline that Thaiss (2001) dismisses as unreal and the particular, local, and diverse instantiations of these projections. That so many of the faculty Thaiss has worked with “routinely evoke their concept of ‘the discipline’ as part of the rationale for their [teaching] methods” (p. 318) suggests that there is something powerfully controlling *and* enabling in this concept—an essential point of Foucault’s (1972) “Discourse on Language.” A revised understanding of *discourse community* should be useful to researchers and teachers in describing the material, social, and rhetorical effects of disciplines. Though many if not all of these effects and constructions are felt and carried out at the local level, to be usefully distinct from *speech community* or even *community*,

the discourse-community concept should incorporate Swales and Miller's insights on the virtual, atemporal, and ideological relationships that literacy supports.

Miller's (1994) conception of rhetorical community as a rhetorical construction and discursive projection helps us understand the social dynamic of rhetorical practices that scholars might describe as connecting them more to other members of their discipline than to other members of their local campus, yet the work of Prior (1998), Christine Casanave (1995), Elizabeth Chin (1994), and Kevin Roozen (2009, 2010) helps us understand the idiosyncratic ways in which these rhetorical practices can be represented, shared, and performed in specific campuses. Qualitative research by Chin (1994) and Casanave (1995) reveals the impact specific local contexts and material resources had for graduate students learning to become participating members of professional discourse communities. Likewise, studies by Casanave (1995), Prior (1998), and Roozen (2009, 2010) stress that the experiences, identities, and personal interests that graduate students bring to their beginning work in a discipline greatly complicate the image of one-way transmission of disciplinary enculturation that Marilyn Cooper (1989) worried the discourse community concept encourages. Casanave (1995) found that international and minority graduate students in a sociology program through "resistance, rebellion, cooperation, [and] suggestions" (p. 94) influenced their professors to modify their courses in order to meet their needs and that such influence may ultimately "help define the broader field and change it over time" (p. 94). Prior (1995) traced how a graduate student in sociology came to deeply influence and change the thinking of her professor through repeated written response and revision interactions. The changes in thinking that the graduate student persuaded her professor to make were motivated significantly by the graduate student's personal, family experiences. Roozen (2009, 2010) explores ways in which two English MA students' encounters with the disciplinary

discourse of literary studies are mediated by their previous encounters with the work of other disciplines such as graphic arts and by their participation in extracurricular activities such as church groups and fan fiction.

These studies asks us to revise simplistic understandings of disciplinary enculturation involving a one-way transmission of views, values, practices, and knowledge and see how the diverse communities to which new members already belong may influence and shape established members' rhetorical constructions of the discipline. Such flux and "cross-pollination" suggests that this construct, though powerful, is not fully homogenizing. In fact, as Kenneth Burke's (1973) famous parlor metaphor attempts to capture, one of the defining features of disciplinary discourse community may be heterogeneity of viewpoints and *agon*. Miller (1994) describes the "fundamentally heterogeneous and contentious" (p. 74) character of rhetorical communities this way:

It is the inclusion of sameness and difference, of us and them, of centripetal and centrifugal impulses that makes a community rhetorical, for rhetoric in essence requires both agreement and dissent, shared understandings and novelty, enthymematic premises and contested claims, identification and division. (p. 74)

Perfect consensus would remove the need for further connection, collaboration, contention, and argument that such a community uses discourse to perform.

In addition to being inaccurate, understandings of discourse communities as fixed in consensus may also lead to detrimental outcomes for instructors and students. Arguments that would limit the concept of discourse community to the temporally and physically proximate often posit the pedagogical goal of creating a discourse community within particular classrooms. These arguments thus articulate an understanding of discourse community as a sought-after ideal

rather than a descriptive term for recurrent patterns of social organization and formation. Even if this idealized image of classrooms was instantiated more frequently—and David Russell’s (2002) historical research coupled with WID ethnographies like Lucille McCarthy’s (1987) indicate that few university classrooms in the past century would meet this ideal—limiting use of the term to only those ideal composition or WAC classrooms may serve to reify stiflingly benign connotations associated with “community.” I believe that concerns regarding the coerciveness of community consensus arise most prominently when understandings of *discourse community* are limited to the walls of a single classroom. Patricia Roberts-Miller (2003) describes the capacity an instructor has to inadvertently exclude and silence the already culturally marginalized in the name of maintaining a cordial and civil classroom discourse community. I argue shifting focus to see an individual classroom as a scene within a larger disciplinary discourse community radically shifts our understandings of the instructor’s power within the scene. Suddenly the professor’s views, lectures, and assignments are in fact contested by other members of the discourse community with equal or greater power, as well as by those with less disciplinary and institutional power but who are learning to use and transform the conventions of the community. If students could be aided to make such a shift in conceptualizing the scene of their classroom—and I believe explicitly sharing and modeling the revised understanding of *discourse community* I am proposing can help them do so—then the *agon* that already exists in the disciplinary discourse community can more genuinely include the voices of students.

Another important, related, and unresolved issue concerns the depth of epistemological and value commitments that legitimate participation in a disciplinary discourse community asks of individuals. One of Thomas Kent’s (1991) objections to the concept of “discourse community” is his understanding that moving from one discourse community to another entails radically

changing worldviews. However, both Swales (1990) and Casanave (1995) point to the potential for individuals, especially students, to try on, without full commitment, the personae discourse-community membership entails. Both hold out hope for this possibility out of concern especially for international and minority students for whom a requirement to abandon a worldview to participate casts too great “a hegemonical shadow” (Swales, 1990, p. 30) over apprenticeship and education. Instead, they see it as possible for students to “perceive themselves as having power to resist, push back, toy, experiment, and, if necessary, continue looking” (Casanave, 1995, p. 108). However my studies of introduction to literature courses suggests nonetheless that adherence to shared values—and the belief that experts can distinguish what Prior (1998) calls *passing* from *deep participation* by evaluating written performances—is integrally implicated even in novice and peripheral participation in disciplinary discourse communities. Instructors of these courses speak of “insiders” and “outsiders,” of excitedly recognizing the words of a colleague in a student’s paper and of other paper writers just not getting it.

Critiques of the supposed unity and stability of discourse communities coupled with histories of their discursive practices teach us that rhetorical analyses used to characterize a discourse community’s genres are necessarily blurred snapshots, always imperfectly pinning down conventions and topoi that are in flux. Nonetheless, I argue such conventions are stable enough to be described and of use not only to writing researchers but also to writers. The conservative nature of disciplinary discourse communities ensures to a degree this stability, while the imperative of disciplinary communities to construct new knowledge and recruit new members equally ensures a counterbalancing pressure of instability and change. My research indicates that even introductory students find teaching informed by an accurate description of a discipline’s conventions and topoi empowering, enabling them to argue with and against

established discourse community members in ways these members find persuasive. That this instruction was both informed by and accompanied with discussion of the theory of disciplinary discourse community I have presented today is, I argue, part of what made this instruction usefully clarifying and transferrable.

References

- Bartholomae, D. (1985). Inventing the University. In M. Rose (Ed.), *When a writer can't write: Studies in writer's block and other composing-process problems* (pp. 134-165). New York: Guilford Press.
- Bawarshi, A. (2003). *Genre and the invention of the writer: Reconsidering the place of invention in composition*. Logan, UT: Utah State UP.
- Beaufort, A. (1997). Operationalizing the concept of discourse community: A case study of one institutional site of composing. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 31(4), 486-529.
- Berkenkotter, C., & Huckin, T. N. (1995). *Genre knowledge in disciplinary communication: Cognition/Culture/Power*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Bizzell, P. (1982). Cognition, convention, and certainty: What we need to know about writing. *PRE/TEXT*, 3(3), 213-243.
- Burke, K. (1973). *The philosophy of literary form* (3rd ed.). Berkeley: U. of California P.
- Casanave, C. P. (1995). Local interactions: Constructing contexts for composing in a graduate sociology program. In D. Belcher & G. Braine (Eds.), *Academic writing in a second language: Essays on research and pedagogy* (pp. 83-110). Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Chin, E. (1994). Redefining "context" in research on writing. *Written Communication*, 11(4), 445-482.
- Cooper, M. M. (1989). Why are we talking about discourse communities? Or, foundationalism rears its ugly head once more. In M. M. Cooper & M. Holzman (Eds.), *Writing as social action* (pp. 202-220). Portsmouth, N.H.: Boyton/Cook.
- Devitt, A. J. (2004). *Writing genres*. Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois UP.
- Foucault, M. (1972). The discourse on language (R. Swyer, Trans.) *The archaeology of knowledge* ([1st American] ed., pp. 215-237). New York: Pantheon Books.

- Freed, R. C., & Broadhead, G. J. (1987). Discourse communities, sacred texts, and institutional norms. *College Composition and Communication*, 38(2), 154-165.
- Harris, J. (1989). The idea of community in the study of writing. *College Composition and Communication*, 40(1), 11-22.
- Herrington, A. J. (1985). Writing in academic settings: A study of the contexts for writing in two college chemical engineering courses. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 19, 331-361.
- Herrington, A. J. (1988). Teaching, writing, and learning: A naturalistic study of writing in an undergraduate literature course. In D. A. Jolliffe (Ed.), *Advances in writing research, volume two: Writing in academic disciplines* (pp. 133-166). Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation.
- Herrington, A. J. (1992). Composing one's self in a discipline: Students' and teachers' negotiations. In M. Secor & D. Charney (Eds.), *Constructing rhetorical education* (pp. 91-115). Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Hyland, K. (2000). *Disciplinary discourses: Social interactions in academic writing*. Harlow, England: Longman.
- Johns, A. M. (1997). *Text, role, and context: Developing academic literacies*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kent, T. (1991). On the very idea of a discourse community. *College Composition and Communication*, 42(4), 425-445.
- McCarthy, L. P. (1987). A stranger in strange lands: A college student writing across the curriculum. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 21(3), 233-265.
- Miller, C. R. (1984). Genre as social action. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 70, 151-167.

- Miller, C. R. (1994). Rhetorical community: The cultural basis of genre. In A. Freedman & P. Medway (Eds.), *Genre and the new rhetoric* (pp. 67-78). London: Taylor & Francis.
- Prior, P. (1998). *Writing/disciplinarity: A sociohistoric account of literate activity in the academy*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Roberts-Miller, T. (2003). Discursive conflict in communities and classrooms. *College Composition and Communication*, 54(4), 536.
- Roozen, K. (2009). 'Fan fic-ing' English studies: A case study exploring the interplay of vernacular literacies and disciplinary engagement. *Research in the Teaching of English*, 44(2), 136-169.
- Roozen, K. (2010). Tracing trajectories of practice: Repurposing in one student's developing disciplinary writing processes. *Written Communication*, 27(3), 318-354.
- Russell, D. R. (1995). Activity theory and its implications for writing instruction. In J. Petraglia (Ed.), *Reconceiving Writing, rethinking writing instruction* (pp. 51-77). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Russell, D. R. (2002). *Writing in the academic disciplines: A curricular history* (2nd ed.). Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Russell, D. R., & Yañez, A. (2003). "Big picture people rarely become historians": Genre systems and the contradictions of general education. In C. Bazerman & D. R. Russell (Eds.), *Writing selves/writing societies: Research from activity perspectives* (pp. 331-362). Fort Collins, Colorado: The WAC Clearinghouse and Mind, Culture, and Activity.
- Swales, J. M. (1990). *Genre analysis: English in academic and research settings*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Swales, J. M. (1998). *Other floors, other voices: A textography of a small university building*.

Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Thaiss, C. (2001). Theory in WAC: Where have we been, where are we going? In S. H. McLeod,

E. Miraglia, M. Soven & C. Thaiss (Eds.), *WAC for the new millennium: Strategies for continuing writing-across-the-curriculum programs* (pp. 299-325). Urbana: NCTE.

Williams, R. (1983). *Keywords: A vocabulary of culture and society*. New York: Oxford

University Press.