Understanding Discourse Communities

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Overview

This chapter uses John Swales' definition of *discourse community* to explain to students why this concept is important for college writing and beyond. The chapter explains how genres operate within discourse communities, why different discourse communities have different expectations for writing, and how to understand what qualifies as a discourse community. The article relates the concept of discourse community to a personal example from the author (an acoustic guitar jam group) and an example of the academic discipline of history. The article takes a critical stance regarding the concept of discourse community, discussing both the benefits and constraints of communicating within discourse communities. The article concludes with writerly questions students can ask themselves as they enter new discourse communities in order to be more effective communicators.

Last year, I decided that if I was ever going to achieve my lifelong fantasy of being the first college writing teacher to transform into an international rock star, I should probably graduate from playing the video game *Guitar Hero* to actually learning to play guitar.* I bought an acoustic guitar and started watching every beginning guitar instructional video on YouTube. At first, the vocabulary the online guitar teachers used was like a foreign language to me—terms like major and minor chords, open G tuning, and circle of fifths. I was overwhelmed by how complicated it all was, and the fingertips on my left hand felt like they were going to fall off from pressing on the steel strings on the neck of my guitar to form

chords. I felt like I was making incredibly slow progress, and at the rate I was going, I wouldn't be a guitar god until I was 87. I was also getting tired of playing alone in my living room. I wanted to find a community of people who shared my goal of learning songs and playing guitar together for fun.

I needed a way to find other beginning and intermediate guitar players, and I decided to try a social media website called "Meetup.com." It only took a few clicks to find the right community for me—an "acoustic jam" group that welcomed beginners and met once a month at a music store near my city of Sacramento, California. On the Meetup.com site, it said that everyone who showed up for the jam should bring a few songs to share, but I wasn't sure what kind of music they played, so I just showed up at the next meet-up with my guitar and the basic look you need to become a guitar legend: two days of facial hair stubble, black t-shirt, ripped jeans, and a gravelly voice (luckily my throat was sore from shouting the lyrics to the Twenty One Pilots song "Heathens" while playing guitar in my living room the night before).

The first time I played with the group, I felt more like a junior high school band camp dropout then the next Jimi Hendrix. I had trouble keeping up with the chord changes, and I didn't know any scales (groups of related notes in the same key that work well together) to solo on lead guitar when it was my turn. I had trouble figuring out the patterns for my strumming hand since no one took the time to explain them before we started playing a new song. The group had some beginners, but I was the least experienced player.

It took a few more meet-ups, but pretty soon I figured out how to fit into the group. I learned that they played all kinds of songs, from country to blues to folk to rock music. I learned that they chose songs with simple chords so beginners like me could play along. I learned that they brought print copies of the chords and lyrics of songs to share, and if there were any difficult chords in a song, they included a visual of the chord shape in the handout of chords and lyrics. I started to learn the musician's vocabulary I needed to be familiar with to function in the group, like *beats per measure* and *octaves* and the *minor pentatonic scale*. I learned that if I was having trouble figuring out the chord changes, I could watch the better guitarists and copy what they were doing. I also got good advice from experienced players, like soaking your fingers in rubbing alcohol every day for ninety seconds to toughen them up so the steel strings wouldn't hurt as much. I even realized that although I was an inexperienced player, I could contribute to the community by bringing in new songs they hadn't played before.

Okay, at this point you may be saying to yourself that all of this will make a great biographical movie someday when I become a rock icon (or maybe not), but what does it have to do with becoming a better writer?

You can write in a journal alone in your room, just like you can play guitar just for yourself alone in your room. But most writers, like most musicians, learn their craft from studying experts and becoming part of a community. And most writers, like most musicians, want to be a part of community and communicate with other people who share their goals and interests. Writing teachers and scholars have come up with the concept of "discourse community" to describe a community of people who share the same goals, the same methods of communicating, the same genres, and the same lexis (specialized language).

What Exactly Is a Discourse Community?

John Swales, a scholar in linguistics, says that discourse communities have the following features (which I'm paraphrasing):

1. A broadly agreed upon set of common public goals
2. Mechanisms of intercommunication among members
3. Use of these communication mechanisms to provide information and feedback
4. One or more genres that help further the goals of the discourse community
5. A specific lexis (specialized language)
6. A threshold level of expert members (24-26)

I'll use my example of the monthly guitar jam group I joined to explain these six aspects of a discourse community.

A broadly Agreed Set of Common Public Goals

The guitar jam group had shared goals that we all agreed on. In the Meetup.com description of the site, the organizer of the group emphasized that these monthly gatherings were for having fun, enjoying the music, and learning new songs. "Guitar players" or "people who like music" or even "guitarists in Sacramento, California" are not discourse communities. They don't share the same goals, and they don't all interact with each other to meet the same goals.

Mechanisms of Intercommunication among Members

The guitar jam group communicated primarily through the Meetup.com site. This is how we recruited new members, shared information about when and where we were playing, and communicated with each other outside of the night of the guitar jam. "People who use Meetup.com" are not a discourse community, because even though they're using the same method of communication, they don't all share the same goals and they don't all regularly interact with each other. But a Meetup.com group like the Sacramento acoustic guitar jam focused on a specific topic with shared goals and a community of members who frequently interact can be considered a discourse community based on Swales' definition.

Use of These Communication Mechanisms to Provide Information and Feedback

Once I found the guitar jam group on Meetup.com, I wanted information about topics like what skill levels could participate, what kind of music they played, and where and when they met. Once I was at my first guitar jam, the primary information I needed was the chords and lyrics of each song, so the handouts with chords and lyrics were a key means of providing critical information to community members. Communication mechanisms in discourse communities can be emails, text messages, social media tools, print texts, memes, oral presentations, and so on. One reason that Swales uses the term "discourse" instead of "writing" is that the term "discourse" can mean any type of communication, from talking to writing to music to images to multimedia.

One or More Genres That Help Further the Goals of the Discourse Community

One of the most common ways discourse communities share information and meet their goals is through genres. To help explain the concept of genre, I'll use music since I've been talking about playing guitar and music is probably an example you can relate to. Obviously there are many types of music, from rap to country to reggae to heavy metal. Each of these types of music is considered a genre, in part because the music has shared features, from the style of the music to the subject of the lyrics to the lexis. For example, most rap has a steady bass beat, most rappers use spoken word rather singing, and rap lyrics usually draw on a lexis associated with young people. But a genre is much more than a set of features. Genres arise out of social purposes, and they're a form of social action within discourse

communities. The rap battles of today have historical roots in African oral contests, and modern rap music can only be understood in the context of hip hop culture, which includes break dancing and street art. Rap also has social purposes, including resisting social oppression and telling the truth about social conditions that aren't always reported on by news outlets. Like all genres, rap is not just a formula but a tool for social action.

The guitar jam group used two primary genres to meet the goals of the community. The Meetup.com site was one important genre that was critical in the formation of the group and to help it recruit new members. It was also the genre that delivered information to the members about what the community was about and where and when the community would be meeting. The other important genre to the guitar jam group were the handouts with song chords and lyrics. I'm sharing an example of a song I brought to the group to show you what this genre looks like.

Heart of Gold

Neil Young

Em C D G
I wanna live, I wanna give.
Em C D G
I've been a miner for a heart of gold.
Em C D G
It's these expressions, I never give.
Em G
That keep me searchin' for a heart of gold.
C G
And I'm gettin' old.
Em G
That keep me searchin' for a heart of gold.
C G
And I'm gettin' old.

Em C D G
I've been to Hollywood, I've been to redwood.
Em C D G
I've crossed the ocean for a heart of gold.
Em C D G
I've been in my mind, it's such a fine line.
Em G
That keep me searchin' for a heart of gold.
C G
And I'm gettin' old.
Em G
That keep me searchin' for a heart of gold.
C G
And I'm gettin' old.
Em7 D E
Keep me searchin' for a heart of gold.
Em7 D E
You keep me searchin' for a heart of gold.
Em 7 D E
You keep my searchin' and I'm growing old.
Em G C G
I've been a miner for a heart of gold.

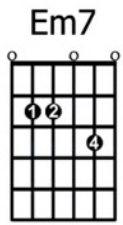

Figure 1: Lyrics and chord changes for "Heart of Gold" by Neil Young with a fingering chart for an E minor 7 chord

This genre of the chord and lyrics sheet was needed to make sure everyone could play along and follow the singer. The conventions of this genre—the "norms"—weren't just arbitrary rules or formulas. As with all genres, the conventions developed because of the social action of the genre. The sheets included lyrics so that we could all sing along and make sure we knew when to change chords. The sheets included visuals of unusual chords, like the Em7 chord (E minor seventh) in my example, because there were some beginner guitarists who were a part of the community. If the community members were all expert guitarists, then the inclusion of chord shapes would never have become a convention. A great resource to learn more about the concept of genre is the essay "Navigating Genres" by Kerry Dirk in volume 1 of *Writing Spaces*.

A Specific Lexis (Specialized Language)

To anyone who wasn't a musician, our guitar meet-ups might have sounded like we were communicating in a foreign language. We talked about the root note of scale, a 1/4/5 chord progression, putting a capo on different frets, whether to play solos in a major or minor scale, double drop D tuning, and so on. If someone couldn't quickly identify what key their song was in or how many beats per measure the strumming pattern required, they wouldn't be able to communicate effectively with the community members. We didn't use this language to show off or to try to discourage outsiders from joining our group. We needed these specialized terms—this musician's lexis—to make sure we were all playing together effectively.

A Threshold Level of Expert Members

If everyone in the guitar jam was at my beginner level when I first joined the group, we wouldn't have been very successful. I relied on more experienced players to figure out strumming patterns and chord changes, and I learned to improve my solos by watching other players use various techniques in their soloing. The most experienced players also helped educate everyone on the conventions of the group (the "norms" of how the group interacted). These conventions included everyone playing in the same key, everyone taking turns playing solo lead guitar, and everyone bringing songs to play. But discourse community conventions aren't always just about maintaining group harmony. In most discourse communities, new members can also expand the knowledge and genres of the community. For example, I shared songs that no one had brought before, and that expanded the community's base of knowledge.

Why the Concept of Discourse Communities Matters for College Writing

When I was an undergraduate at the University of Florida, I didn't understand that each academic discipline I took courses in to complete the requirements of my degree (history, philosophy, biology, math, political science, sociology, English) was a different discourse community. Each of these academic fields had their own goals, their own genres, their own writing conventions, their own formats for citing sources, and their own expectations for writing style. I thought each of the teachers I encountered in my undergraduate career just had their own personal preferences that all felt pretty random to me. I didn't understand that each teacher was trying to act as a representative of the discourse community of their field. I was a new member of their discourse communities, and they were introducing me to the genres and conventions of their disciplines. Unfortunately, teachers are so used to the conventions of their discourse communities that they sometimes don't explain to students the reasons behind the writing conventions of their discourse communities.

It wasn't until I studied research about college writing while I was in graduate school that I learned about genres and discourse communities, and by the time I was doing my dissertation for my PhD, I got so interested in studying college writing that I did a national study of college teachers' writing assignments and syllabi. Believe it or not, I analyzed the genres and discourse communities of over 2,000 college writing assignments in my book *Assignments Across the Curriculum*. To show you why the idea of discourse community is so important to college writing, I'm going to share with you some information from one of the academic disciplines I studied: history. First I want to share with you an excerpt from a history course writing assignment from my study. As you read it over, think about what it tells you about the conventions of the discourse community of history.

Documentary Analysis

This assignment requires you to play the detective, combing textual sources for clues and evidence to form a reconstruction of past events. If you took A.P. history courses in high school, you may recall doing similar document-based questions (DBQs).

In a tight, well-argued essay of two to four pages, identify and assess the historical significance of the documents in ONE of the four sets I have given you.

You bring to this assignment a limited body of outside knowledge gained from our readings, class discussions, and videos. Make the most of this contextual knowledge when interpreting your sources: you may, for example, refer to one of the document from another set if it sheds light on the items in your own.

Questions to Consider When Planning Your Essay

- What do the documents reveal about the author and his audience?
- Why were they written?
- What can you discern about the author's motivation and tone? Is the tone revealing?
- Does the genre make a difference in your interpretation?
- How do the documents fit into both their immediate and their greater historical contexts?
- Do your documents support or contradict what other sources (video, readings) have told you?
- Do the documents reveal a change that occurred over a period of time?
- Is there a contrast between documents within your set? If so, how do you account for it?
- Do they shed light on a historical event, problem, or period? How do they fit into the "big picture"?
- What incidental information can you glean from them by reading carefully? Such information is important for constructing a narrative of the past; our medieval authors almost always tell us more than they intended to.
- What is not said, but implied?
- What is left out? (As a historian, you should always look for what is *not* said, and ask yourself what the omission signifies.)
- Taken together, do the documents reveal anything significant about the period in question? (Melzer 3-4)

This assignment doesn't just represent the specific preferences of one random teacher. It's a common history genre (the documentary analysis) that helps introduce students to the ways of thinking and the communication conventions of the discourse community of historians. This genre reveals that historians look for textual clues to reconstruct past events and that historians bring their own knowledge to bear when they analyze texts and interpret history (historians are not entirely "objective" or "neutral").

In this documentary analysis genre, the instructor emphasizes that historians are always looking for what is not said but instead is implied. This instructor is using an important genre of history to introduce students to the ways of analyzing and thinking in the discourse community of historians.

Let's look at another history course in my research. I'm sharing with you an excerpt from the syllabus of a history of the American West course. This part of the syllabus gives students an overview of the purpose of the writing projects in the class. As you read this overview, think about the ways this instructor is portraying the discourse community of historians.

A300: History of the American West

A300 is designed to allow students to explore the history of the American West on a personal level with an eye toward expanding their knowledge of various western themes, from exploration to the Indian Wars, to the impact of global capitalism and the emergence of the environmental movement. But students will also learn about the craft of history, including the *tools used* by practitioners, how to weigh *competing evidence*, and how to build a convincing argument about the past.

At the end of this course students should understand that history is socially interpreted, and that the past has always been used as an important means for understanding the present. Old family photos, a grandparent's memories, even family reunions allow people to understand their lives through an appreciation of the past. These events and artifacts remind us that history is a dynamic and interpretive field of study that requires far more than rote memorization. Historians balance their knowledge of *primary sources* (diaries, letters, artifacts, and other documents from the period under study) with later interpretations of these people, places, and events (in the form of scholarly monographs and articles) known as *secondary sources*. Through the evaluation and discussion of these different interpretations historians come to a socially negotiated understanding of historical figures and events.

Individual Projects

More generally, your papers should:

1. Empathize with the person, place, or event you are writing about. The goal here is to use your understanding of the primary and secondary sources you have read to "become" that person–i.e. to appreciate their perspectives on the time or event under study. In

essence, students should demonstrate an appreciation of that time within its context.

2. Second, students should be able to present the past in terms of its relevance to contemporary issues. What do their individual projects tell us about the present? For example, what does the treatment of Native Americans, Mexican Americans, and Asian Americans in the West tell us about the problem of race in the United States today?
3. Third, in developing their individual and group projects, students should demonstrate that they have researched and located primary and secondary sources. Through this process they will develop the skills of a historian, and present an interpretation of the past that is credible to their peers and instructors.

Just like the history instructor who gave students the documentary analysis assignment, this history of the American West instructor emphasizes that the discourse community of historians doesn't focus on just memorizing facts, but on analyzing and interpreting competing evidence. Both the documentary analysis assignment and the information from the history of the American West syllabus show that an important shared goal of the discourse community of historians is socially constructing the past using evidence from different types of artifacts, from texts to photos to interviews with people who have lived through important historical events. The discourse community goals and conventions of the different academic disciplines you encounter as an undergraduate shape everything about writing: which genres are most important, what counts as evidence, how arguments are constructed, and what style is most appropriate and effective.

The history of the American West course is a good example of the ways that discourse community goals and values can change over time. It wasn't that long ago that American historians who wrote about the West operated on the philosophy of "manifest destiny." Most early historians of the American West assumed that the American colonizers had the right to take land from indigenous tribes—that it was the white European's "destiny" to colonize the American West. The evidence early historians used in their writing and the ways they interpreted that evidence relied on the perspectives of the "settlers," and the perspectives of the indigenous people were ignored by historians. The concept of manifest destiny has been strongly critiqued by modern historians, and one of the primary goals of most modern historians who write about the American West is to recover the perspectives and stories of the indigenous peoples as well as to continue

to work for social justice for Native Americans by showing how historical injustices continue in different forms to the present day. Native American historians are now retelling history from the perspective of indigenous people, using indigenous research methods that are often much different than the traditional research methods of historians of the American West. Discourse community norms can silence and marginalize people, but discourse communities can also be transformed by new members who challenge the goals and assumptions and research methods and genre conventions of the community.

Discourse Communities from School to Work and Beyond

Understanding what a discourse community is and the ways that genres perform social actions in discourse communities can help you better understand where your college teachers are coming from in their writing assignments and also help you understand why there are different writing expectations and genres for different classes in different fields. Researchers who study college writing have discovered that most students struggle with writing when they first enter the discourse community of their chosen major, just like I struggled when I first joined the acoustic guitar jam group. When you graduate college and start your first job, you will probably also find yourself struggling a bit with trying to learn the writing conventions of the discourse community of your workplace. Knowing how discourse communities work will not only help you as you navigate the writing assigned in different general education courses and the specialized writing of your chosen major, but it will also help you in your life after college. Whether you work as a scientist in a lab or a lawyer for a firm or a nurse in a hospital, you will need to become a member of a discourse community. You'll need to learn to communicate effectively using the genres of the discourse community of your workplace, and this might mean asking questions of more experienced discourse community members, analyzing models of the types of genres you're expected to use to communicate, and thinking about the most effective style, tone, format, and structure for your audience and purpose. Some workplaces have guidelines for how to write in the genres of the discourse community, and some workplaces will initiate you to their genres by trial and error. But hopefully now that you've read this essay, you'll have a better idea of what kinds of questions to ask to help you become an effective communicator in a new discourse community. I'll end this essay with a list of questions you can ask yourself whenever

you're entering a new discourse community and learning the genres of the community:

1. What are the goals of the discourse community?
2. What are the most important genres community members use to achieve these goals?
3. Who are the most experienced communicators in the discourse community?
4. Where can I find models of the kinds of genres used by the discourse community?
5. Who are the different audiences the discourse community communicates with, and how can I adjust my writing for these different audiences?
6. What conventions of format, organization, and style does the discourse community value?
7. What specialized vocabulary (lexis) do I need to know to communicate effectively with discourse community insiders?
8. How does the discourse community make arguments, and what types of evidence are valued?
9. Do the conventions of the discourse community silence any members or force any members to conform to the community in ways that make them uncomfortable?
10. What can I add to the discourse community?

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Teacher Resources for Understanding Discourse Communities by Dan Melzer

Overview and Teaching Strategies

This essay can be taught in conjunction with teaching students about the concept of genre and could be paired with Kerry Dirk's essay "Navigating Genres" in *Writing Spaces,* volume 1. I find that it works best to scaffold the concept of discourse community by moving students from reflecting on the formulaic writing they have learned in the past, like the five-paragraph theme or the Shaffer method, to introducing them to the concept of genre and how genres are not formulas or formats but forms of social action, and then to helping students understand that genres usually operate within discourse communities. Most of my students are unfamiliar with the concept of discourse community, and I find that it is helpful to relate this concept to discourse communities students are already members of, like online gaming groups, college clubs, or jobs students are working or have worked. I sometimes teach the concept of discourse community as part of a research project where students investigate the genres and communication conventions of a discourse community they want to join or are already a member of. In this project students conduct primary and secondary research and rhetorically analyze examples of the primary genres of the discourse community. The primary research might involve doing an interview or interviews with discourse community members, conducting a survey of discourse community members, or reflecting on participant-observer research.

Inevitably, some students have trouble differentiating between a discourse community and a group of people who share similar characteristics. Students may assert that "college students" or "Facebook users" or "teenage women" are a discourse community. It is useful to apply Swales' criteria to broader groups that students imagine are discourse communities and then try to narrow down these groups until students have hit upon an actual discourse community (for example, narrowing from "Facebook users" to the Black Lives Matter Sacramento Facebook group). In the essay, I tried to address this issue with specific examples of groups that Swales would not classify as a discourse community.

Teaching students about academic discourse communities is a challenging task. Researchers have found that there are broad expectations for writing that seem to hold true across academic discourse communities, such as the ability to make logical arguments and support those arguments

with credible evidence, the ability to use academic vocabulary and write in a formal style, and the ability to carefully edit for grammar, syntax, and citation format. But research has also shown that not only do different academic fields have vastly different definitions of how arguments are made, what counts as evidence, and what genres, styles, and formats are valued, but even similar types of courses within the same discipline may have very different discourse community expectations depending on the instructor, department, and institution. In teaching students about the concept of discourse community, I want students to leave my class understanding that: a) there is no such thing as a formula or set of rules for "academic discourse"; b) each course in each field of study they take in college will require them to write in the context of a different set of discourse community expectations; and c) discourse communities can both pass down community knowledge to new members and sometimes marginalize or silence members. What I hope students take away from reading this essay is a more rhetorically sophisticated and flexible sense of the community contexts of the writing they do both in and outside of school.

Questions

1. The author begins the essay discussing a discourse community he has recently become a member of. Think of a discourse community that you recently joined and describe how it meets Swales' criteria for a discourse community.
2. Choose a college class you've taken or are taking and describe the goals and expectations for writing of the discourse community the class represents. In small groups, compare the class discourse community you described with two of your peers' courses. What are some of the differences in the goals and expectations for writing?
3. Using Swales' criteria for a discourse community, consider whether the following are discourse communities and why or why not: a) students at your college; b) a fraternity or sorority; c) fans of soccer; d) a high school debate team.
4. The author of this essay argues that discourse communities use genres for social actions. Consider your major or a field you would like to work in after you graduate. What are some of the most important genres of that discourse community? In what ways do these genres perform social actions for members of the discourse community?

Activities

The following are activities that can provide scaffolding for a discourse community analysis project. To view example student discourse community analysis projects from the first-year composition program that I direct at the University of California, Davis, see our online student writing journal at fycjournal.ucdavis.edu.

Introducing the Concept of Discourse Community

To introduce students to the concept of discourse community, I like to start with discourse communities they can relate to or that they themselves are members of. A favorite example for my students is the *This American Life* podcast episode that explores the Instagram habits of teenage girls, which can be found at https://www.thisamericanlife.org/573/status-update. Other examples students can personally connect to include Facebook groups, groups on the popular social media site Reddit, fan clubs of musical artists or sports teams, and campus student special interest groups. Once we've discussed a few examples of discourse communities they can relate to on a personal level, I ask them to list some of the discourse communities they belong to and we apply Swales' criteria to a few of these examples as a class.

Genre Analysis

One goal of my discourse community analysis project is to help students see the relationships between genres and the broader community contexts that genres operate in. However, thinking of writing in terms of genre and discourse community is a new approach for most of my students, and I provide them with heuristic questions they can use to analyze the primary genres of the discourse community they are focusing on in their projects. These questions include:

1. Who is the audience(s) for the genre, and how does audience shape the genre?
2. What social actions does the genre achieve for the discourse community?
3. What are the conventions of the genre?
4. How much flexibility do authors have to vary the conventions of the genre?
5. Have the conventions of the genre changed over time? In what ways and why?

6. To what extent does the genre empower members of the discourse community to speak, and to what extent does the genre marginalize or silence members of the discourse community?
7. Where can a new discourse community member find models of the genre?

Research Questions about the Discourse Community

You could choose to have the focus of students' discourse community projects be as simple as arguing that the discourse community they chose meets Swales' criteria and explaining why. If you want students to dig a little deeper, you can ask them to come up with research questions about the discourse community they are analyzing. For example, students can ask questions about how the genres of the discourse community achieve the goals of the community, or how the writing conventions of the discourse community have changed over time and why they have changed, or how new members are initiated to the discourse community and the extent to which that initiation is effective. Some of my students are used to being assigned research papers in school that ask them to take a side on a pro/con issue and develop a simplistic thesis statement that argues for that position. In the discourse community analysis project, I push them to think of research as more sophisticated than just taking a position and forming a simplistic thesis statement. I want them to use primary and secondary research to explore complex research questions and decide which aspects of their data and their analysis are the most interesting and useful to report on in their projects.