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Book Author(s): Patricia Bizzell

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What Is a Discourse Community?

The concept of “discourse community,” though now widely used in composition studies, has not been defined authoritatively—that is, in such a way as to win assent from all composition researchers and scholars of rhetoric. In the absence of consensus, let me offer a tentative definition: a “discourse community” is a group of people who share certain language-using practices. These practices can be seen as conventionalized in two ways. Stylistic conventions regulate social interactions both within the group and in its dealings with outsiders; to this extent “discourse community” borrows from the sociolinguistic concept of “speech community.” Also, canonical knowledge regulates the world views of group members, how they interpret experience; to this extent “discourse community” borrows from the literary-critical concept of “interpretive community.” The key term “discourse” suggests a community bound together primarily by its uses of language, although bound perhaps by other ties as well, geographical, socioeconomic, ethnic, professional, and so on.

This tentative definition of “discourse community” will not, I suspect, provide an infallible test for determining whether a given social group constitutes a discourse community. The recent work of John Swales (1987), which I will discuss below, can aid us here in emphasizing the crucial function of a collective project in unifying the group, some work in the world its members could not accomplish on their own. But we need to go further toward acknowledging that discourse community membership implicates people in *interpretive* activities.

Dealing with the interpretive world views fostered by discourse communities also creates problems for the field of composition

studies itself, considered as a discourse community. For one thing, we are struggling to define legitimate professional activity for participants in our field—to establish the stylistic conventions and canonical knowledge appropriate to a composition studies discourse community. For another, we are struggling to develop pedagogies that can initiate undergraduates into academic discourse, and graduate students into the disciplinary discourse of our field, without too forcibly imposing upon them academic and disciplinary world views.

Concerning the first of these problems, Bruce Herzberg (1986) has observed that although the concept of “discourse community” is not clearly defined, it is the “center of a set of ideas” including: “that language use in a group is a form of social behavior, that discourse is a means of maintaining and extending the group’s knowledge and of initiating newcomers, and that discourse is epistemic or constitutive of the group’s knowledge” (1). Not everyone using the concept of “discourse community” assents to all of these ideas. Each scholar tends to favor the elements that seem to lead composition studies in the direction he or she wants the field to go. The idea that language use is social behavior has been used to point to the social contexts of writing. Scholars who favor this reading of the concept of “discourse community” seek to ally composition studies with the social sciences. Attention to the way discourse confers authority on knowledge and its possessors has prompted study of discourse conventions, the “rules of the game” for winning authority. Studying these rules requires ideologically informed stylistic analysis (of the sort performed in defining “interpretive communities,” for example). Hence this focus reaffirms the ties between composition studies and literary criticism. Alternately, to look at discourse as epistemic is to examine the role of rhetoric in canon formation, interpreting “canon” in the broadest postmodern sense to refer to all kinds of signifying “texts.” Put another way, the question is: “What can we know?” This is essentially a philosophical concern. Hence efforts to establish an authoritative definition of “discourse community” can be understood as a struggle over whether the disciplinary definition of composition studies will most closely approach the social sciences, literary studies, or philosophy.

This struggle makes it difficult for us to attend to the changes in

thinking we are inducing in graduate student initiates into the composition studies discourse community. Such changes can be profound and painful. We would, I suspect, prefer to believe that our discourse community does not entail a world view. Similarly, we would prefer to believe that our efforts to initiate undergraduates into the academic discourse community are without prejudice to whatever world views they bring with them.

The overarching methodological issue here is precisely how to study a discourse community's power to constitute world view. We may perhaps begin to get at this element of the "discourse community" concept by studying the value contradictions that arise when discourse communities overlap. Such study could profitably unite composition researchers of a social-science orientation and rhetoric scholars of a literary-critical or philosophical bent, provided all are willing to attempt ideological self-consciousness.

Such an "interdisciplinary" project within a discipline of composition studies could not be undertaken in hopes of transcending world views, however. The problems I have noted above probably cannot be solved, but they can be addressed. If we come to seek critical self-consciousness about the ideologies of our own and other discourse communities, we must also be careful not to let the ambiguous word "critical" cover over an important argument. When "critical" is used in composition studies, as in the term "critical thinking" for example, it seems to mean something like "analytic" or "self-conscious in an academic, self-questioning way." The word carries no explicit political meaning, yet it evokes political connotations, both through the everyday sense of "critical" as meaning "attacking something," and through the use in composition studies of the term "critical consciousness," which means using literacy education to foster Christian Marxist political ends, as its originator Paulo Freire (1968) has defined it. Hence we may say that we are encouraging our students to be "critical" of language-using practices, without specifying any political agenda for such criticism, and yet with hope that the word's political undertones will prevent our pedagogy from being taken as one of indoctrination. The argument about whether education can be "critical" in the Marxist sense needs, on the contrary, to be aired.

Working with a tentative definition of “discourse community” as a group sharing language-using practices, I will look at Swales’s important emphasis on the group’s project orientation. With the help of Carol Berkenkotter and her colleagues (1987), and of Bruce Herzberg I will consider how the limitation of Swales’s work—the difficulty of attending to discourse communities’ world views—also poses problems for composition studies as we train our graduate students for our discourse community and initiate undergraduates into the larger academic discourse community. With the help of literary critic Jane Tompkins (1986), I will suggest that attending to contradictions may, if not solve our problems, at least give us a way of “doing composition studies” that is theoretically satisfying and politically responsible in the face of pluralism both among scholarly orientations within our field, and among interpretive world views of students entering the academy.

Discourse Community as Project Site

In his recent work the applied linguist John Swales seeks to determine whether a given social group is a discourse community by testing the group against six criteria. These criteria emphasize that for Swales, a discourse community is a social group using language to accomplish work in the world—the context of appropriate social behavior provides cues for how best to employ the discourse conventions to accomplish this work.

Swales suggests that discourse communities vary in the degree to which they demand a major lifetime commitment to their work, personal involvement or care for the work, and rigid adherence to discourse conventions. But, he says, any discourse community should meet the following six criteria:

1. There must be some common, public “goal” the group seeks to accomplish, some work the participants are trying to perform together.
2. There must be some discursive “forum” accessible to all participants; oral, visual, and or/print media may be involved.
3. The group must use its forum to work toward its goal by “providing information and feedback.”

4. The group develops expectations for how productive exchanges of information should proceed, which is to say that the group shares discourse conventions or “genres.”

5. The group’s discourse not only is thus specialized, but exhibits a tendency to become increasingly specialized; there is “an inbuilt dynamic towards an increasingly shared and specialized terminology.”

6. There must be a “critical mass” of experts in the group at any given time: people who are intimately familiar with the specialized genres with which the group seeks to accomplish its goals and who thus can initiate novices. The “survival of the community depends on a reasonable ratio between experts and novices” (2–3; I have quoted key terms and phrases).

Thus we see that for Swales, the concept of “discourse community” is useful to explain how a social group employs discourse to coordinate complex activities, to work together on very large, long-term projects. Entering a discourse community means signing on for the project. True, if we examine a discourse community according to Swales’s criteria, we will be looking primarily at its stylistic conventions. But at least Swales suggests that there is much to gain by submitting to the requisite stylistic indoctrination: access to work one could not accomplish individually. Swales also allows that people commonly belong to several discourse communities and have varying degrees of commitment to them, so that one allegiance need not totally dominate a person’s life.

I would question, however, whether Swales’s account acknowledges the power of discourse communities to shape world views. He emphasizes the element of choice in community membership, suggesting that one cannot be a member of a discourse community of which one is unaware. As a social scientist, Swales needs for people to be able to give testimony about their discourse community memberships so he can study them, testimony people could not give if they did not know they belonged. Hence for Swales (as for scholars in composition studies), defining the entity denoted “discourse community” sets his disciplinary research agenda. Indeed, Swales tells us that he has developed his “discourse community” heuristic to solve what he calls the “café owner problem” for his graduate students. People who manage small restaurants obviously have much in common, at least as far as their daily business

tasks are concerned, but, wondered the graduate students, do they therefore comprise a discourse community? Applying his heuristic, Swales now can say that they do not, for café owners have no discursive forum for the sharing of information.

Even if there is no *Café Owners' Newsletter*, however, I suspect that this social group is a discourse community. Whether they realize it or not, its members may share the social-class-based or ethnically based discursive practices of people who are likely to become café owners in their neighborhood. They may all use similar discourses when talking to their employees or when buying their supplies. By treating the discourse community as essentially a stylistic phenomenon, Swales delimits the object of study for his graduate students in such a way as to leave out larger socioeconomic and cultural elements—that is, those elements that most forcefully create world views in discourse.

Bird watchers and philatelists are Swales's prime illustrations of his concept of "discourse community." Hobby groups are engaged in such casual projects that it appears ridiculous to consider their discourse as constituting a world view. Yet I would contend that this superficial triviality is misleading. The bird watcher or philatelist participates in a discourse that encourages a certain kind of thinking—collecting and classifying discrete bits of information as represented by stamps or bird sightings. When such a hobby becomes a consuming passion, there may even be an "inbuilt dynamic" for this habit of mind to shape many areas of the hobbyist's experience—indeed, this is a tendency that comic literature has exploited.

Moreover, I suspect that not everyone is equally likely to become a bird watcher or a philatelist. Socioeconomic and cultural factors shape the hobby group discourse community in terms of who has the requisite leisure time and disposable income to participate. Even more interesting from the epistemic point of view is the question of whose prior social experiences predisposes him—or more rarely, her—to the collecting and classifying habit of mind. Ultimately, discourse community membership probably affects a person's world view in ways of which the person must remain unaware on a daily basis, in order to participate comfortably in the community's work.

World View in the Composition Studies Discourse Community

If we acknowledge that participating in a discourse community entails some assimilation of its world view, then it becomes difficult to maintain the position that discourse conventions can be employed in a detached, instrumental way. If we acknowledge that participating in the academic discourse community entails a world view, then we discover that the ways in which we establish authoritative or canonical knowledge are problematic. We are involved in some contradictions (see Harris 1987).

One contradiction concerns conflicting goals for college writing programs. On the one hand, we know that most institutions support these programs in order to initiate students into the academic discourse community, to “prepare” them for all the other written work they will do in school. Many of us can assent to this goal insofar as we would like to help our students stay in school. But, on the other hand, we do not always assume that social justice will be adequately served merely by the students’ staying in school. We are sometimes influenced by a Marxist view of the school as a site for indoctrination in the dominant culture and rationalization of its inequalities, a view to which many of us were persuaded by our own experiences as students in the 1960s. To the extent that we see school this way, we hope that initiation into academic discourse will not mean total assimilation. We don’t want students to forget the insights into inequality that many of them bring to school, from experience in other communities. In short, our dilemma is that we want to empower students to succeed in the dominant culture so that they can transform it from within; but we fear that if they do succeed, their thinking will be changed in such a way that they will no longer want to transform it.

Another contradiction involves the discipline of composition studies itself—if it is a discipline. On the one hand, composition studies is coalescing into an ever-more-coherent discourse community. As our conferences, journals, and graduate programs proliferate, we engage in ever more self-study to articulate the accepted modes of research and scholarship in our field. We feel that this process is beneficial in part because it sets professional standards, the ab-

sence of which can be very costly in terms of individual career development. For example, Stephen North prefaces an overview of composition studies (1987) with an anecdote that describes his motive for undertaking the study: North's graduate student failed his Ph.D. oral exam because he could give no account of the field as a whole. We also value disciplinary self-study because it brings various subgroups into productive dialogue, as Charles Bazerman proposes to do at a "Research Network" workshop before the 1988 Conference on College Composition and Communication. We don't intend that we all should be doing the same kind of work, but that we all can agree on how the work contributes to a complete picture of the objects of study in composition studies.

Obviously this is a project in creating canonical knowledge. Yet we are troubled by the issues of inclusion and exclusion that canon formation always raises. We want to be an academic discipline, yet we want to be unlike any other academic discipline in that we neither rule out nor require any form of knowledge or methodology. I believe that this eclecticism springs from a deep conviction that to create canonical knowledge is to participate in the processes of domination exercised by the culture we want to resist. Perhaps because composition studies has been marginal and politically powerless in the academy for so long, we are reluctant to truncate the criticism of inequalities in our own interests as well as in the interests of our students.

We often look for a way out of these contradictions by claiming that we are producing and conveying value-neutral methods of analysis, an exploratory discourse if you will, that constitutes no world view. This is to say that we wish to identify all discourses but our own as epistemic. This claim takes a slightly different form when applied to our work with undergraduates than when applied to our work in scholarship and professional development. As applied to undergraduate teaching, Bruce Herzberg (1986) has called this rationale the "Myth of the Gatekeeper":

According to this myth, the community of writing instructors stands at the entrance to the fortress of college education. . . . Therefore, we believe, we have a special opportunity and responsibility to influence our students' relation to the academy at large. . . . For many students,

the knowledge they seek is indeed locked away in a forbidding fortress to whose rooms they have no key. (9)

Herzberg points here to the metadiscursive or “preparatory” function of writing programs to which I alluded earlier, but—tellingly—he characterizes it as a myth, a story that has some function in the world but is not a report on the world. In short, he suggests, we should not think of ourselves as merely proferring a key to entering students, certainly not a key to all mythologies. Because Herzberg views all discourse as epistemic, he argues that insofar as writing instruction initiates students into academic discourse, it provides not simply access to knowledge but knowledge itself, which is to say academic ways of thinking. To believe we have not affected our students’ thinking profoundly is to fall into what Stanley Fish calls “anti-foundationalist theory hope” (see chapter 10, this volume).

Graduate programs in rhetoric can present the same kind of problem, when we assume that the scholarly and pedagogical methods we teach there are equally amenable to any politically interested end. For example, Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas N. Huckin, and John Ackerman (1987) have used the concept of “discourse community” to investigate the changes a graduate student made in his writing style in response to his professors’ expectations. “Nate” gradually abandoned a style characterized by frequent use of the first person, widely varied sentence length, vivid and colloquial language, etc., in favor of more distanced, formal academic discourse. Berkenkotter and her colleagues argue that this movement should not be seen as Nate’s victimization by professorial bullies. Rather, Nate’s understanding of the audience for whom he was writing was shaped intertextually, through his entire new experience of talking and listening to fellow graduate students and professors and reading a range of scholarly works presented by his professors as constituting canonical knowledge in the field.

Nate wanted to grow as a teacher and student of composition, so he signed on to work in a community devoted to composition research. But Berkenkotter et al. provide information to suggest that the change Nate underwent is more far-reaching than a change in his style, that entering this discourse community required him to

change his thinking about composition studies in radical ways. For one thing, the program Nate joined promotes a particular orientation toward composition studies. It is the graduate program at Carnegie Mellon University where, as Berkenkotter et al. note, a social-science-oriented form of academic discourse is preferred. For another thing, Nate himself is not an academic innocent; he took an M.A. in English before coming to Carnegie Mellon, and taught composition for six years. Berkenkotter et al. point out that Nate's problem in learning to write for his graduate professors should be conceptualized as a clash among discourse communities, not the inscription of academic discourse on an otherwise blank slate.

Nate's own initial orientation toward composition studies is suggested in several ways. For example, the style Nate abandoned is probably not nonacademic, but rather a kind of writing encouraged in certain school writing courses, those informed by what James Berlin (1987) has called expressivism. Expressivists encourage the use of the first person, vivid language, etc. That Nate was initially an expressivist is further suggested by the topic he chose for one of his first graduate research papers: "How and Why Voice Is Taught: A Pilot Survey" (15). "Voice" is a concept associated with expressivism, and in this paper Nate alluded to such well-known expressivists as Donald Murray, Ken Macrorie, and Peter Elbow (15–16). The change in Nate's style is accompanied by a change in his sense of what should be studied, as reflected in the title of the paper he wrote after eighteen months in the Carnegie Mellon program: "Toward a Generative Computer Environment: A Protocol Study" (22).

Of course, it is as difficult securely to infer changes in world view from stylistic changes as it is to separate thought and style. The evidence presented by Berkenkotter and her colleagues does not prove conclusively that the Carnegie Mellon program altered Nate's world view, and indeed, it was not the primary purpose of their research to investigate world views. Nevertheless Berkenkotter et al. speculate that Nate was not "transformed" by his experience, in the sense of being made to abandon all previous academic discourse community allegiances in order to enter the subgroup of social-science-oriented composition researchers. As Swales's work would

suggest, Nate simply enlarged his repertoire of community memberships, integrating when possible and adapting when necessary.

But Berkenkotter and her colleagues caution that the process of learning a new community's discourse conventions may not occur without conflict. They conclude with a quote from Nate that suggests painful struggles in his process of entering this discourse community: "I just need to do it if for no other reason than that you have to know something from the inside before you can fairly criticize it" (30). Nate expresses a sense that there may be something to criticize in his new community, and a hope that he retains sufficient autonomy to criticize it. These feelings render all the more poignant the concluding questions of Berkenkotter and her colleagues: "How, for example, do the sociopolitical constraints that govern the 'manufacture of knowledge' in composition studies affect a graduate student's choice of research program? To what extent are the issues that concern composition teachers subsumed by the agendas of mentors as they join powerful research enterprises, such as the one we studied here?" (30).

I would argue that we must acknowledge conflict as a frequent and perhaps inevitable concomitant of discourse community interactions, whether we focus on undergraduate students' entry into the academic discourse community or graduate students' entry into the subcommunity of our field—which in turn has different theoretical orientations nested within it, as we have seen.

Recognizing the Political Interests of Discourse Communities

If discourse communities entail world views, then conflicts can arise when discourse communities overlap. Both within a society and within a person who has multiple discourse community memberships, the resolution of such conflicts requires the exercise of power. The struggle among discourse communities can thus be seen as a political struggle. Socially privileged discourse communities tend to win such battles; but this does not mean that they are absolutely impervious to challenge. The current canon debate in literary studies illustrates some successful challenges. Literary theorist Jane Tompkins has examined how such challenges proceed.

Tompkins has defined herself professionally as what I might call a “counter-critic”—that is, someone who questions the dominant literary canon. Tompkins’s questions have often come from a feminist perspective, but recently (1986) she explored the implications of her position as one who wished to question the racism of the dominant canon. She tells us that in order to prepare for teaching a course in colonial American literature, she read widely in literary and historical documents on the relations between Native Americans and European immigrants to North America. Initially she hoped that this research would enable her to tell the “true story” and counter the racism and ethnocentrism of Puritan accounts, which are the only ones regarded in the dominant literary canon.

But as she read, Tompkins encountered stories of Native American behavior that irresistibly prompted her to think of them as savages. She was particularly moved by the story of a Comanche captive, a young white girl who was awakened each day with a burning stick thrust into her face—which eventually burned her nose off. As a result of such stories, Tompkins came to feel a sharp conflict between her moral repugnance at racism and her moral repugnance at casual torture. This conflict demonstrated that her initial aim, to get the “true story” that would defend Native Americans against European racism, was mistaken. The Native American side of the story, Tompkins now sees, must be regarded as just as politically interested as the European version, insofar as it is embodied in discourse that constitutes the Native American world view, which may value individual life differently than Europeans do. (Be it noted that Tompkins’s problematic example was a white-authored captivity narrative; the Native American “text” here should perhaps be regarded, in Foucaultian fashion, as the body of the captive.)

But if all positions must be interested, then no position can be condemned as interested from a disinterested vantage point; interests can be attacked only in terms of other, opposing interests. In short, Tompkins now says that she was mistaken to think that any amount of research could give her an unassailably disinterested position. This does not mean her research was a waste of time. In the absence of unassailable positions, arguments about whose knowledge is more legitimate must be pursued reasonably—or as I

would say, rhetorically. To make a reasonable argument, one must strive to be well informed. Tompkins says:

I must piece together the story of European-Indian relations as best I can, believing this version up to a point, that version not at all, another almost entirely, according to what seems reasonable and plausible, given everything else that I know. . . . If the accounts don't fit together neatly, that is not a reason for rejecting them all in favor of a metadiscourse about epistemology; on the contrary, one encounters contradictory facts and divergent points of view in practically every phase of life, . . . and one decides as best one can given the evidence available. (118)

I would add that being well informed does not entail just collecting evidence, but listening to the contradictions that arise from membership in various discourse communities. In the case of Tompkins, it is possible to think of her as participating in several specialized discourse communities that are subgroups in the larger “counter-critical” one questioning the dominant canon; here the relevant subgroups are those of feminist discourse and racially sensitive discourse. It’s probably not a coincidence that the white character in Tompkins’s most shocking “Indian” story is a female. It’s as if while doing her racially motivated research, Tompkins heard a voice from feminist discourse rendering this captivity narrative particularly problematic. If the captive had been male, she might not have noticed the cruelty, by her own standards, of his treatment, at least not noticed it enough to interrupt herself in her antiracist research for reflection on the interested nature of all such accounts.

Tompkins treats the presence of contradictory accounts and conflicting positions as normal. The “everything else that I know,” the knowledge she uses to make decisions, is full of contradictions and conflicts. The important point here is to see the presence of conflicts not only as normal—indeed, as inevitable if we normally belong to several discourse communities, each with its own canonical knowledge—but as positively an advantage. The more conflicts, the more input from discourse communities at cross purposes, the more chance for an interested critique of one discourse community from another to be sparked. We simply have to accept that there can be none other than interested critiques.

If contradiction has heuristic value, then we can regard each individual as a unique resource for originating what can become collective political action for the transformation of inequalities. I would venture to say that each individual embodies a unique collection of interests, the product of his or her unique combination of life experiences. Each collection of interests raises possibilities for generating that dialectic of conflicting positions from which arises the dynamic for change.

As long as human beings are masses of contradictions, then, the power of a discourse community, no matter how culturally dominant, can never be total. Someone will always be ready to exercise what David Bartholomae has called a “rhetoric of combination” (1985), bringing oppositions into jarring contact that generates a new idea. As he wittily demonstrates, anything can be related to anything else in terms of an interested viewpoint. Thus I might even wish to argue that healthy discourse communities, like healthy human beings, are also masses of contradictions. The presence of the contradictions, though of course not all can be attended to at every moment, helps to ensure the community’s viability in the face of changing demands from other discourse communities and changing conditions in the material world. Therefore, we should accustom ourselves to dealing with contradictions, instead of seeking a theory or pedagogy that appears to abrogate them.

Appendix: Canonical Knowledge in the Composition Studies Discourse Community

I have suggested that we might begin to think of composition studies as an “interdisciplinary discipline,” a discourse community that coheres comfortably to address the project of understanding writing, a project shared by composition researchers oriented toward the social sciences and rhetoric scholars oriented toward literary studies and philosophy.

This would mean that part of the body of canonical knowledge in composition studies would be social-science influenced: for example, sociocognitive research on composing processes; ethnographic research on writing in natural settings (in and out of the academy); sociolinguistic research on language variety; work using the orality/

literacy model to study ancient rhetoric and modern newcomers to literacy; and more.

Also, canonical knowledge would include scholarship influenced by literary studies: for example, studies of premodern rhetorical treatments of style and their effects on discursive practices, especially the nonliterary; contemporary academic discourse conventions and genres; discussions of theoretical connections between rhetoric and postmodern literary theories; and more.

Moving from literary criticism to literary theory brings us to a third element in canonical knowledge, namely work with a philosophical orientation: for example, scholarship on premodern rhetoric emphasizing theoretical (philosophical) implications; historiographic studies; ideological analyses of the discursive practices of various social groups; and more.

Some of all this research and scholarship would have pedagogical implications and some would be directed explicitly to improving the teaching of writing. Knowledge of pedagogy, where appropriate, thus also becomes an important part of canonical knowledge in composition studies. Composition studies may indeed be distinguished among academic disciplines for our serious interest in pedagogy. At the same time, the richness of research and scholarship in the field as I have sketched it above suggests that one's projects need not be solely devoted to, or judged by, their pedagogical applications.

It follows from this outline of composition studies that graduate work leading to an English degree concentration in the field should be diverse. Probably the student should be introduced to all the elements of canonical knowledge, social scientific, literary, and philosophical, and their pedagogical applications, while choosing to specialize in one area. This training argues for a diverse graduate faculty and graduate course offerings, perhaps not to be encompassed by the Department of English alone at all institutions. We can accommodate the richness of research and scholarship in composition studies if we expect no less in preparing graduate students for this field, than has been customary in preparing degree candidates in English literature. This might mean, for example, "introductory" courses in three of the four areas outlined above plus a cluster of courses in the area of concentration, amounting probably

to at least half the course work of a student who will receive a Ph.D. in English. Our collective effort to define such curricula might help to curb eclecticism and theoretical shallowness in some of our scholarship.

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