

Discourse community

Erik Borg

We do not generally use language to communicate with the world at large, but with individuals or groups of individuals. As in life, for discussion and analysis in applied linguistics these groups are gathered into communities. One such grouping that is widely used to analyse written communication is *discourse community*. John Swales, an influential analyst of written communication, described discourse communities as groups that have goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve these goals. Central to his analysis is the notion of genre, the organizational patterns of written communication which he sees as 'belong[ing] to discourse communities' and conversely, helping to define those communities (1990:9; for genre, see Allison 1999).

The concept of discourse communities developed from the concepts of speech community and interpretive community, and sits somewhat uneasily between them. 'Speech community' (Hymes 1972) refers to actual people who recognize their language use as different from other language users, e.g. Australian English or Geordie English. 'Interpretive community' (Fish 1980), on the other hand, refers not to a gathering of individuals, but to an open network of people who share ways of reading texts, primarily literary texts; this term therefore highlights the social derivation of interpretation.

Unlike a speech community, membership of a discourse community is usually a matter of choice; unlike an interpretive community, members of a discourse community actively share goals and communicate with other members to pursue those goals. One additional element generally characterizes discussions of discourse communities: these discussions typically focus on the use and analysis of written communication. Swales (1990), for example, suggested that a prototypical discourse community might be a society of stamp collectors scattered around the world but united by a shared interest in the stamps of Hong Kong. The collectors never gather together physically; instead a newsletter that has a particular form of text organization, making it a genre, which they use to pursue their goals, unites them. Other writers (e.g. Johns 1997; Porter 1986) have suggested that discourse communities might have common interests, but not necessarily common goals, as, for example, a family or the alumni body of a university. Some writers have described an

‘academic discourse community’, while others have identified discourse communities within the academy, for example, palaeontologists or political scientists.

Beyond the study of writing in academic contexts, the concept of discourse community has proved fruitful for the study of writing for specific purposes. For example, the need to identify and address a particular audience in business settings has been studied by Killingsworth and Gilbertson (1992), Olsen (1993), and Orlikowski and Yates (1994) among others. Offord-Gray and Aldred made ‘research into the learner needs as perceived by the discourse community’ (1998: 77) the first principle in designing their ESP course for accountants, and, by implication, an organizing principle of any ESP course design.

However, several issues have not been well defined in relation to discourse communities: how large (or small) a discourse community might be; whether speech is needed to maintain a discourse community; whether purpose is the defining characteristic of a discourse community, and how stable a discourse community, and therefore its genres, are. Porter (1992) argued that there is a ‘public discourse community’, and others have suggested there may be an ‘academic discourse community’. It is necessary to ask whether the discourse of such nebulous communities can be described in meaningful terms. At the opposite end, can a family scattered around the world but united by e-mail be described as having a discourse?

In 1990, Swales described a discourse community that was united only by written communication. However, in 1998 he revisited the question and differentiated between discourse communities and ‘place discourse communities’ which were united by both written and spoken communication. This element is significant, as it touches on how the community reproduces itself, and how novice members are initiated into the expectations of the community. Whether novices can learn these expectations through the analysis and teaching of written texts, or only through a process of apprenticeship (Atkinson 1997; Wenger 1998) has implications for the teaching of writing within a community, such as academic communities.

There is a further question of whether shared goals are necessary to define a discourse community. Although Swales (1990) felt shared goals were definitive, a ‘public discourse community’ cannot have shared goals, and more crucially, a generalized ‘academic discourse community’ may not have shared goals or genres in any meaningful sense. This may be why, as Johns (1997) noted, ‘discourse community’ is being displaced by ‘community of practice’, a term from sociocultural theory rather than linguistics, even in contexts where a linguistic term might seem appropriate, such as the 2002 conference theme of the British Association of Applied Linguists, ‘Applied linguistics and communities of practice’. ‘Communities of practice’ (Wenger 1998: 78) has a clear definition that includes ‘mutual engagement’ and ‘a joint enterprise’, which separates it from the more diffuse understandings that surround discourse community.

Finally, there is the question of the stability and power of discourse communities and their genres. If discourse communities are seen as stable, with experts who perform gatekeeping roles, then their genres are normative, and novices must conform to the expectations of the community in order to enter it. Other writers (e.g. Canagarajah 2002) suggest that this view takes power away from learners, and instead he proposes that conventions and rules should be deconstructed, with novices encouraged to appropriate the discourse of the community, both for their own purposes and for the renewal of the discourse community itself. In this, as with other disputed issues surrounding 'discourse community', there are significant implications for the teaching of writing.

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The author

Erik Borg is a lecturer in the English Language Centre at Northumbria University and a PhD student at the University of Leeds. He is a member of the co-ordinating committee of the IATEFL Research SIG, and is interested in academic literacy and all sorts of writing.

Email: erik.borg@unn.ac.uk