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Theories of Writing

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Short Seminar Paper

Looking back at my blog posts from this quarter, I came across my third blog post that was about discourse communities. After reading what I wrote about our class discussion on discourse communities in class, I realized that I still did not fully grasp the concept of discourse communities and what they stood for. On top of this, at the end of my blog post I posed the general question, “what are people’s thoughts on and feeling towards discourse communities” and “why do people become a part of these communities”? I thought to answer this, it would be interesting to find first hand journals from insider perspectives on discourse communities to deeper understand how they view these communities and their values.

To start off it would be beneficial to get a clear and deeper understanding of what a discourse community is. Discourse communities became more popular in the 1980s and were usually a group of scholarly writers with common beliefs. Linguist John Swales defined a discourse community as, “groups that have common goals and purposes, and use communication to achieve their goals”. With this definition alone, we see that discourse communities are groups that not only have the same or similar values or beliefs but are a group of people that are driven academically or spiritually by these common values to achieve something. Swales also believes that there are certain characteristics that discourse communities possess. The first of these characteristics is the community “has a broad agreed set of common public goals”. This means that these communities are not secretive with the goals and values they uphold, and it is easy for non-members to know what the goals of the community are. This also means that these communities are very susceptible to critiques of their writing because their goals and beliefs are public knowledge. Another characteristic of these communities is that they have “mechanisms of intercommunication among its’s members” and “uses its participatory mechanisms to provide information and feedback”. These two characteristics show that it is important for discourse communities to not only share a common goal, but also provide resources in order to reinforce these values and provide guidelines to their writing along the way of reaching their goal. These feedback resources that are provided in a discourse community also allow for the member to learn and grow more due to the criticism he or she receives from the rest of the community. The next characteristic that Swales believes discourse communities have is that it “has a threshold of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discoursal expertise”. According to the article, this ultimately means that within the community, the members all have different degrees of knowledge on their area of expertise. With these different degrees of knowledge, a hierarchy forms to help manage and guide the community. Also, the different degrees of knowledge allow for many different levels of criticisms to be given to community members and therefore giving a wide range of degrees of expression towards a similar goal. According to Swales, these are the basic characteristics that define what the goal of discourse communities are and how they work together to achieve these goals.

Now that we have a deeper understanding as to what an ideal discourse community is, we can start to discuss the different feelings that people have towards these communities. Swales, who was member of a discourse community himself said, “[A] speech community typically inherits its membership by birth, accident, or adoption; a discourse community recruits its members by persuasion, training or relevant qualifications”. Through Swale’s previous definition of discourse community, his word choices, and his comparison of a speech community and a discourse community, you can sense his pride. There is a prideful manner in the way Swales explains that members of the discourse community can use their knowledge of persuasion to recruit members that they deem qualified to the standards of the community. This shows that some members of these communities join because of the sense of pride they develop in the community. This could be pride in their values of knowledge or even just pride for being eligible to be a member. Either way, whether for the pride of the title or pride in their deep knowledge, the members feel a strong sense of belonging to somewhat of an “elite” group of scholars that entices members to join.

Another discourse community member, Joe Harris a member of writing discourse, stated, “we find a concept both seductive and powerful, one that offers us a view of shared purpose and effort and that also makes a rhetorical claim on us that is hard to resist”. Through this statement we see that discourse communities offer a sense of fulfillment and purpose to its members. Thorough Harris’s usage of the words “seductive and powerful” we can see that the concept of shared knowledge for these writers is a tempting and satisfying feeling. Also, typically people would not use “seductive and powerful” to describe writing or academics but by doing this, Harris is emphasizing how being a part of a discourse community is such an emotional and passionate experience for members. This emotional way to share and develop deeper knowledge is another reason that people have a strong desire to become a part of these communities.

According to another writer and speaker, M Jimmie Killingsworth, when he thinks about his discourse community, he emphasizes the strong sense of community that he is exposed to. Killingsworth states, “[people are] involved simultaneously in both local and global discourse communities will feel challenged”. Patricia Bizzel, another academic community member shared that, “[g]roups of society can become accustomed to modifying each other’s reasoning and language in certain ways. Eventually, these familiar ways achieve the status of conventions that bind the group in a discourse community”. Lastly, Harris shared that people in these communities have a “sense of like-mindedness and warmth that makes community at once such an appealing *and* limiting concept”. All of these members emphasize the strong feeling of community and belonging that discourse communities expose them to. This comfortable setting allows members to challenge each other academically without worry of judgement. Within this setting, they are presented with ways to further develop their knowledge through feedback and challenges offered by other “like-minded” individuals. The familiarity that they feel in these communities is a welcoming concept that is so deep where they run the risk of getting too comfortable in and might not interact with others academically. What I mean by this is that members can become so accepting of other member’s critiques and might not expose their work to feedback from people outside of their community. Because of this, peoples writing can become biased because they are so academically challenging and can only be fully appreciated by other intellects within their community.

A common feeling that a lot of members spoke about the attractiveness of the feeling of belonging and affirmation they receive as a result of being a member of a discourse community. According to Bizzell, discourse communities can come “to seem like an oppressive affirmation of one —and only one— set if discursive practices”. Harris also argues that, “change and struggles within a community constitutes normal activity that [o]ne does not need consensus to have community”. Both of these viewpoints show that these discourse community members feel affirmation in their beliefs and do not feel as though they have to conform their beliefs to others’ beliefs despite the feedback critique they receive. The different beliefs and knowledge of people within the community, ironically, makes the community more unified.

As for my personal experience participating in a discourse community, I would say that our Theories of writing class would qualify. On the first day of classes I remember going around the room talking about all the students desired majors and minors. The students desired majors ranged everywhere from sciences, to business, and even creative writing. But the thing that everyone had in common was their desired minor in writing. This proves to me that although we all may have different perspectives on writing and literacy, we were all on the same track to develop our knowledge of writing. Through in class discussions and blog posts, it became very apparent that we all had different overall belief son writing. But, through comments on each others blog posts, we were able to work together, through critique methods, to help each other on our writing journeys.

Thinking in terms of writing communities specifically, Harris talks about how the writing process is not solely a personal process. He describes writing a part of a community as “We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say”. This quote from Harris emphasizes the fact that that writing communities provide a basis for the member to base the construction of their work on. Being a member of these communities allows writers to have a more defined path to direct the subject of their writing to help keep them on track. Harris also talks about how members of a writing community do not become a member and then conform the beliefs of the community. Instead, it is more of a simultaneous conformity based on the writer’s previous beliefs. This allows writers to write alongside people they admire with similar or the same understandings of writing. Both the guidance and the familiarity that discourse communities offer to writers are strong support systems for writers that allow them to further grow in and develop their knowledge of writing.

Through the perspectives of writers and speakers and personal experience, I have been able to develop a stronger concept as to why discourse communities exist. I have come to learn that these communities thrive through sharing common goals and common interests. These members value the development of knowledge through feedback and communication within the community. The members continue interest in these communities because of the strong sense of belonging they feel to the other members and the community as a whole. Discourse communities with an expertise in writing allows members to have helpful guidance and feedback that helps the develop their knowledge as well as themselves as a writer. In deepening my knowledge of the definition of discourse communities and what characteristics they possess, I have come to realize that our Theories of Writing class could qualify as one. Through my participation in this class, I have been exposed to different beliefs and criticisms of classmates. I can honestly say through this exposure I have become more much more educated in writing and literacy.

Works Cited

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