Discourse Communities, Sacred Texts, and Institutional Norms

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The systematic investigation of "the speech community" has long been a subject of inquiry among linguists, from the dialectologists who charted rural speech forms in the mid-1800s (Gumperz 116) to the dialectologists of the 1960s who, following the innovations of Labov, initiated the first serious interest in the speech of the cities (Halliday 154-55). Although speech communities have been variously characterized (Hudson 25-30), we may adopt Hymes's definition: "a community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech, and rules for the interpretation of at least one linguistic variety," for example, standard, vernacular, dialect, etc. (54). The ethnography of communication focuses on speech communities and the organization of communication within them (Saville-Troike 17).

Despite this long history of inquiry, speech communities have not traditionally been an area of study in rhetoric. As Martin Nystrand writes in *What Writers Know,* rhetoric has tended to focus on audience, linguistics, on the speech community: "The *rhetorical study of audience*" takes "into account the ways in which writers locate all available means for achieving particular effects on readers. . . . The *linguistics of writing,* by contrast, is the examination of the effects of readers, as speech community of the writer, upon writers and the texts they compose" (1-2).

Only recently have compositional studies begun to investigate communities of writers and readers, though the terminology seems to be changing, to "discourse communities," in order to signal the focus on the written rather than just the spoken. Patricia Bizzell, for example, argues that lack of familiarity with the academic discourse community is an important cause of students' writing problems, and both James A. Reither and Kenneth A. Bruffee discuss the importance of enabling students to understand discourse communities' bodies of knowledge, conventions, and strategies. Marilyn M. Cooper attempts to describe a discourse community and the dialectic involved as discoursers and community each act upon the other and change each other. In

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"The Ecology of Writing," she adopts a metaphor linguists such as Einar Haugen in "The Ecology of Language" and Charles O. Frake in "Cultural Ecology and Ethnography" have appropriated from the biological sciences. For Cooper, "writing is an activity through which a person is continually engaged with a variety of socially constituted . . . systems: all the characteristics of any individual writer or piece of writing both determine and are determined by the characteristics of all the other writers and writings in the systems" (367-68).

Discourse Communities and Writing Research

Several possible reasons exist for discourse communities becoming a subject of writing research. One, we suspect, stems from our profession's desire to establish itself *as* a discourse community, that is, to foster standardization, autonomy, historicity, and vitality (Fishman 18-21). Standardization occurs through dictionaries, journals, and exemplary texts as well as through various establishments by which a community names and defines itself. Examples might include recent publications such as Woodson's *A Handbook of Modern Rhetorical Terms;* the numerous new journals and books (especially collections of essays) publishing research in writing, including that in business, technical, and professional communication; the large number of new conferences in these and related areas; and the bibliographies being compiled by NCTE-affiliated organizations, the Society for Technical Communication, and the Association of Teachers of Technical Writing. Standardization, of course, also fosters autonomy, a condition the community desires in order to establish its uniqueness from other similar and sometimes dominant communities such as that comprising literary studies. In order to increase its autonomy, moreover, the community concerns itself with its historicity by discovering its ancestry and the reasons for its present shape and practices—for example, by trying to understand how the modes of discourse arose and held sway; by analyzing how rhetoric, once a dominant field of inquiry, became a stepchild of literary studies; by discovering how organicist notions of inspiration precluded studies of invention; and so forth. Finally, the more standardized, autonomous, and historically oriented a discourse community becomes, the more it has vitality—interactive networks that use language to perform the community's vital functions. Thus, in its quest to become a discipline, our profession began to recognize itself as a discourse community, and this recognition has fostered a desire to study those social and cultural systems through and by which writing takes place.

A second possible reason is very much a part of the first. The early (i.e., within the last 15 years!) significant studies of writing or the writing process implicitly had a developmental orientation, in that they focused upon subjects within certain age groups (e.g., Britton, et al., Emig; and Graves). Each of

these studies, however, investigated school-sponsored writing; that is, they re-searched composing processes and behaviors that took place within discourse communities inevitably defined by the educational system. We can see that clearly now, of course, because of the considerable amount of research cur-rently undertaken outside the academy, in discourse communities such as those in business, government, and the professions in general. The existence of a book such as Odell and Goswami's *Writing in Non-Academic Settings* sug-gests that the profession recognizes discourse communities both within and outside of the academy and that the communities themselves variously condi-tion the writing act in ways worth examining.

Another possible reason for our current interest in discourse communities may have to do with our profession's dominant focus on process, and thereby our sudden recognition that we have excluded other important areas of con-cern. The movement from a teacher-centered to a student-centered pedagogy (attended to and influenced by the shift from product to process) and much of the discipline's focus on cognitive processes have tended to emphasize the au-tonomous writer, he or she who composes, not within a system but by dint of well-oiled heuristics and problem-solving strategies, who composes by freely negotiating among memory, text, reader, and world. This celebration of the autonomous writer has taken place precisely at a time when the post-structuralist enterprise has removed the writer or speaker from center stage. No longer an author of language, the writer is, instead, authored by language. Not a manipulator of signs, the writer is manipulated by them, subjugated by "the prison-house of language." In adopting a systematic approach to the study of structures and systems, structuralism has become a source of new in-sights in a wide variety of disciplines, including, of course, literary studies and linguistics. Given the increasingly interdisciplinary nature of our own profession, it is natural that we too have become interested in those social codes and artifacts the meaning of which leads us to a consideration of the community and the systems that created them.

Whatever the reason for new inquiries into discourse communities and a writer's relationship to them, it seems clear that we need to know a great deal more about them, about what characterizes them and how they function. We need to know how they condition and influence not only the written products composed within them but the behaviors, attitudes, and strategies that ulti-mately produce those products, which in turn define the communities them-selves. For both overtly and tacitly, these communities establish paradigms that discoursers adhere to or, often at their risk, depart from (see, for example, Kuhn; Hairston; and Young). The paradigms reign like prelates and govern-ments reign: they set an agenda and attempt to guarantee its meeting, often rewarding those who do and discouraging those who don't. They legislate con-duct and behavior, establishing the eminently kosher as well as the unseemly and untoward.

The legislation itself takes the form of institutional norms, which, write

Broadhead and Freed in *The Variables of Composition,* "govern rhetorical decisions designed to make a text adhere to accepted practices within a company, profession, discipline, or the like" (12). As applied to texts, these norms include documentation practices (such as APA or MLA), in-house style of format guides, and group or disciplinary injunctions such as "do not use the first person." Institutional norms, however, do not have to be formalized or codified in written documents, for they can exist as a result of tradition or practice. As applied to the writing process, they reflect a writer's overall environment for thinking, composing, and revising.

A computer company such as IBM will have one set of norms, and however similar it may be to IBM, Digital (or Hewlett Packard or Apple) will have another. Each organization is a different culture and each has different rules. And though each will use the English language and write the English language, the writing (and the attitudes about and behaviors during the writing) may very well be different.

How does one study the discourse community at IBM or Apple or, for that matter, at the English department of State University? Fortunately, the issues, procedures, and caveats already exist in the literature of ethnographic communication. In her chapter "The Analysis of Communicative Events," for example, Saville-Troike discusses the types of data needed, data collection procedures, components of communication, the identification of communicative events and their analysis, and other matters essential for a complete understanding of a speech community. She quite obviously focuses upon speech rather than discourse communities, but the issues and procedures appear appropriate for both. Let us provide a brief and very limited example of the kind of analysis possible.

Two Cultures; Two Discourse Communities

Rather than focusing on IBM and Apple, we can examine the discourse communities and the composing environments of two similar organizations: a large international management consulting firm (call it Omega, for reasons of confidentiality) and a very large international accounting firm (call it Alpha). Both firms do a substantial amount of consulting, undertaking well over 1000 engagements each year, and both share many of the characteristics described in Broadhead and Freed (45-64). Both have similar procedures for bidding on jobs and similar approaches for conducting engagements. Both serve similar business segments and occasionally compete for the same jobs. For the most part, however, they are not usually competitors because each firm serves a different business area. Whereas Omega's health care group, for example, may perform a marketing or strategic planning study for a hospital, Alpha's health care group might study the hospital's cost accounting system.

But the firms' essential difference from one another stems not from their

different business focus, but from this: even though Alpha has many more management consultants than most of the country's largest management consulting firms, its consultants are a minority in Alpha, which is dominated by auditors, tax accountants, and the like. Thus, despite the firms' similarities in terms of procedures and tasks, the dominant auditing culture of Alpha affects its consultants' proposals and even the way they approach the writing of them.

To understand how and why their proposals are different from Omega's, we can analyze Alpha's *Management Consultant Proposal Guide.* The *Guide* is not a primary cause of the difference (though, as we will see, it does influence behavior and text), but a reflection of it, just as many documents or artifacts reflect the culture producing them.

Divided into two major sections, the document discusses "Business Development" and "Proposal Letters." It describes procedures for initiating, continuing, and concluding engagements, and contains advice and instruction for proposing those engagements as well as samples of model proposals. In short, the *Guide* is a procedural manual—though considerably more. For as a procedural manual, the document dashes almost all of our generic expectations. Except in the sample passages from proposals, it rarely contains second-person pronouns and active verbs. Its instructions never say "do this"; they always say "this shall [or will] be done." The phrasing is not so much an accident of composition as it is (at some level) a matter of intention. For the *Guide* is the firm's Revised Statutes (revised August 1973) and its sacred text.

Like a sacred text, it contains commandments: "The manager in charge of each engagement shall prepare at its conclusion a brief report." And codes of conduct: management consultant "staff members must adhere to the professional ethics of public accounting which prohibit solicitation." Not everyone has read the manual and many that have don't refer to it often, but it functions as part of a rite of passage, ending not in membership in society or the Church, but into the corporate body. One is supposed to have read it, and during the trial period following initiation, some employees are held more strictly to it. No single person authored the document—the covering letter is signed "R. T. Jones, Partner (or Manager)"—but, clearly, the corporate body authorized its existence. The document, in short, codifies the organization's institutional norms, its rules and regulations. It is a guide, not just for writing proposals but for living, working, and surviving in the culture.

Although Omega's and Alpha's cultures depend a good deal upon proposals, a utopian goal of both firms is to exist in a state where proposals are not necessary—where, for a new client, the engagement is sold orally or, for a current client, the engagement involves "add-on" work. In these and other similar situations, only a confirming letter is required, setting forth briefly and in very general terms the project's scope, approach, timing, and cost. Indeed, in some cases, having to write a proposal is an indication of failure: if the consultants' previous work for a client were extremely well-received, the latter would see no need to open up the bidding for a subsequent engagement.

But utopia does not exist and proposals must be written and many of them must be extremely persuasive. They need to exhibit an intimate knowledge of the client's situation, and they need to indicate the results or benefits or "deliverables" the client will receive for the money the client must pay. The proposals must be, as so many of them say in the approach section, "results-oriented." For this reason, the management consulting firm Omega frequently includes in its proposals a section variously titled "Deliverables of the Study." "Results of the Study," or "Benefits of the Study," a desirable section because potential clients, after all, wish to know what their tens of thousands of dollars will buy. They desire creative, aggressive, hard-working consultants committed to solving their firm's problems and getting results. Such is the environment Omega's and Alpha's consultants must compete in.

But there is another environment Alpha's consultants work in, the auditing culture, whose ethic might also involve hard work and commitment, but also, and necessarily, caution. In a financial feasibility study, one cannot promise results—one cannot assure a client that certain goals will be met—because economic forces such as inflation or recession are beyond the consultants' and client's control and may prevent those goals from being achieved. Thus, "we must be cautious" and "not unduly expose the Firm." Alpha's auditing culture therefore shies away from promising a client that he will save a certain amount of money or realize a certain profit as a result of the *auditing* services, and this required caution finds its way into the *management consultant's* proposal guide:

> statements pertaining to numerical goals or objectives should never be used. . . . As consultants *we* may feel *we* could attain this level *if* we were the decision-makers and *if* we operated our system. . . . Outside economic and other forces . . . which are not under our control or the client's control may prevent successful attainment of such a goal.

This legitimate concern about providing benefits in a specific context, however, is generalized to a global concern about providing them at all. The benefits section, according to the *Guide,* "is to be included only when we feel it is needed." And later (italics added): "In *unusual* circumstances, where it is *required* that a benefits section be prepared, *caution* must be exercised and *constraints* must be applied to promising or stating goals or specific objectives to be attained."

Throughout the *Guide,* the subtext reads "caution" so pervasively that two of the four steps during the proposal's final review are to ensure that "no unnecessary or unreasonably [sic] professional risks are being assumed" and that "the Firm is not subjected to unnecessary exposure through expressed or implied warranties or stated benefits." No responsible firm, of course, will promise what it cannot deliver, and both Omega and Alpha apparently maintain high ethical standards. On some occasions the firms have voluntarily terminated an engagement because the client's problems were so enormous that

the agreed-upon study could not be successful, though the client wouldn't have known that until up to a year following the study's completion. Nevertheless, however desirable caution and safety are in the auditing culture, they are not necessarily salutary attributes in management consulting. When caution becomes too pervasive, when it is a constraint as well as an attitude, it can affect the consultants' proposals.

The prevailing attitude about benefits has far-reaching effects, both on Alpha's overall composing environment and (as a consequence) on its proposals. In management consulting, value-added is a palpable concept, a commodity consultants desire to give to their clients and one the clients expect the study to provide. Therefore, proposal writers can discuss the expected value of the study, not only in a benefits section but throughout the document. But they tend to focus on benefits only if they are oriented to do so, if they are allowed to adopt a rhetorical stance that authentically voices their belief that they can do so. Such a stance is more difficult at Alpha than at Omega.

Further, the lack of emphasis on benefits at Alpha causes writers to place that section, when it exists at all, in a less-than-ideal position. Most of Alpha's (and Omega's) proposals are 5-15 double-spaced pages, in letter form. The proposals are relatively short because busy executives must read them. They are written as letters, rather than as more formal documents, because of the highly personal environment in which management consulting services are sold. The documents often begin informally ("Dear Jim" or "Dear Jane") and usually maintain a friendly tone throughout until the final section on timing and costs, which is usually boilerplated and, for contractual reasons, replete with jargon. Except in one or two perfunctory, closing paragraphs, the original tone is rarely recovered. But it could be if a benefits section concluded the proposal. Because the firm de-emphasizes benefits, however, the "Proposal Letter Checklist" adapted from the *Guide* lists the benefits section as ninth in a series of 14 possible proposal segments. One senior-level executive remarked that, if he found a benefits section existing last in a proposal, he would move it up to ninth position because the "Checklist" says he should.

The informal tone mentioned above is essential because of many engagements' two-team approach, the management consulting team working with the client's team to share expertise and transfer skills and technologies. One goal in many engagements is to have the consultants "work themselves out of a job" so that, by the study's completion, expertise will have been transferred to allow the client's organization to stand on its own. Accordingly, the proposals often include themes of commonality, equality, and partnership and stress joint goals, processes, and teamwork.

To discuss and emphasize the benefits of the team concept, Omega's documents often include a section on "Study Strategy" that serves as an introduction to the following section on methods or approach. "Study Strategy" provides an opportunity to sell the team concept and to provide a rationale for it, *in the process of defining the roles and responsibilities of the client and consulting firms'*

major players. Thus, the considerable work demanded of the client team and the potential threat involved in defining that work can be subordinated to a discussion of how the client's participation will (1) reduce the study's cost, (2) generate enthusiasm for the project, (3) keep the client informed at every step of the engagement, and (4) most efficiently transfer to the consultants the client's intimate knowledge of their organization and transfer to the client the consultants' knowledge and skills.

Alpha's proposals do not include a section on study strategy, one that precedes "Approach" and allows them to develop a theme of "working together." Instead, the proposals contain (and the *Guide* specifies) two separate sections following the approach: "Alpha Participation" and "Client Participation." Included in "Alpha Participation" are:

1. The key steps (keyed to "Approach" steps) to be performed by Alpha personnel.
2. The staffing of the engagement—in terms of skills, *preferably not names of Alpha consultants* and members of the management group [emphasis added].

Included in "Client Participation" are:

1. The key steps (keyed to "Approach" steps) to be performed by client personnel.
2. Identification of the client personnel to participate in the engagement—*by name* and/or by position or background [emphasis added].

The segmentation of sections and the preference for naming the client's players but not Alpha's are again a function of the auditing culture. In financial feasibility and other studies performed by auditors and tax accountants, the consultants need for the client to supply detailed information and numerous in-house materials before they can begin the engagement; one typical proposal for such a study listed 32 documents. Hence, a separate section is often needed to detail the large amount of information necessary for the client to provide. In auditing proposals, moreover, the firm's reputation is usually more important to clients than the individual auditors, each of whom (one can assume) is as good as another, as long as they work for a reputable and prestigious firm. Thus, if the consulting team isn't vital to name, it's advantageous for Alpha not to name it, because the firm can remain more flexible in staffing its engagements.

But again, what works for Alpha's auditing culture may work against its management consultants as they compete in a different environment. Recall that Omega's section on "Study Strategy" responds to the management consulting milieu by allowing writers to incorporate important themes concerning teamwork. If teams and teamwork are important, moreover, then it follows that the consulting team *members* are also important, as indeed they are.

In fact, because the consultants work so long in the client's organization and so intimately with the client's personnel, *their* abilities and reputations and the chemistry *they* will bring to the project are often more important to clients than the consultants' firm and reputation. In the auditing environment, that is, clients buy the reputation of the *firm;* in the management consulting environment, however, clients buy the abilties of the *consultants.*

Let us conclude this analysis of two cultures, two discourse communities, with a final point, one that suggests how the cultures can be reflected, not just in their artifacts such as proposals and proposal guides, but also through the terminology they use to define their procedures and tasks. When Omega's consultants follow up on a lead or begin to respond to an RFP (Request for Proposal), they are involved in what is known as a "PC [potential client] Situation," and their first visit with the potential client is referred to as a "PC Call." At Alpha, however, the term "PC Situation" does not exist; the initial visit is referred to, not as a "Potential Client Call," but as a "Client Call."

The different terminology suggests important aspects about Alpha's culture. A great number of Alpha's *potential management consulting clients* are long-standing *actual auditing clients* of the firm. For the auditors, then, in these instances, "client call" is an adequate description, serving to define an accurate rhetorical situation. For the management consultants, however, the clients are not yet actual, even though the terminology suggests a rhetorical situation in which benefits are not as necessary to enumerate and value is not as important to communicate. Worse, Alpha's consultants must contend both with the auditing culture's cautionary impulse and with their own fears in these situations that a poorly conducted study will jeopardize an auditor-client relationship often worth millions of dollars annually to their firm. In the meantime, of course, they may be competing for the job with firms like Omega, for whom the client is not actual but potential and for whom Omega's consultants may therefore stand a better chance of writing a proposal responding adequately to the rhetorical situation both firms confront.

From Alpha to Omega to Freshman Composition

In substantive ways, many of Alpha's institutional norms are invisible to the firm's consultants because the norms govern and even define, in Stanley Fish's words, "the ordinary, the everyday, the obvious, [and] what goes without saying" (268). They make conduct as normal and unobtrusive as breathing. Although the norms and their effects never exist a-contextually, quite often they are not perceived because the context is invisible, transparently bound to the ordinary and the everyday. However unseen they may be, the norms define the writer's discourse community, a context that conditions, governs, and constrains, not just the message, but the writer producing it. Alpha and Omega are such communities; so is Freshman Composition 101; so is Jane Brown's Freshman Composition 101 class.

In teaching our students to analyze audiences and rhetorical situations, we help them to anchor a message to a discourse community, to determine how the message acts within and is acted upon by the community. The intended reader resides within that group and is herself governed by a host of norms adhered to by the community and by larger groups to which the community belongs. These norms can be "cultural"—prescribed by handbooks, textbooks, and dictionaries, and demanding that the text adhere to the culture's idea of good behavior and good communication. The norms can also be "institutional"—prescribed by MLA style guides, by management consultant proposal guides, by English Department policy, or by tradition or practice, and demanding that the text adhere to accepted practice within a profession, a company, or a discipline. The norms can be "generic"—demanding that the text not overstep boundaries imposed by a particular genre such as a personal experience narrative or an internal proposal. Or they can be "situational"—regulating tone, style, content, and level of technicality to achieve purposes and meet needs in specific rhetorical situations (Broadhead and Freed 10-14).

To understand these norms, students could take an ethnographic perspective exploring and describing the various "cultures" or communities they inhabit. What makes their fraternity? What rituals, attributes, sacred texts, manners, and dispositions make theirs recognizably theirs and not another's? What makes their class, whether economic or composition? How did they become a member, and what part does language play in defining class boundaries, in making some insiders and others outsiders, in helping us "to join communities we do not yet belong to and to cement our membership in communities we already belong to"? (Bruffee, "Social Construction" 784)

As teachers, we too could benefit from an ethnographic perspective. We could understand that Freshman Composition 101, like every discourse community, has its sacred texts and revised statutes, many of them unwritten, part of the milieu, but no less palpable in their effect on writing and on behavior during writing. "Choose and limit the subject, develop a thesis, write an outline, draft, revise, and edit" was one such text (albeit a written one) that conditioned product and process, and we taught and perhaps even believed it because it was given, there before us, and there before our being there, though we rarely realized its sacredness because it was a code that went without saying.

We can realize that much about the 101 culture will be unknowable to freshmen because they are not privy to the histories of rhetoric and English education or to the machinations of the department's and the profession's politics. But we can also remember that our own department's policies and our own classroom presence can create a culture (using the word in its laboratory, petri-dish sense) that is the proper medium, the proper ground and grounding, for reaction and growth. In profound ways we can influence the culture before us by establishing conditions that regulate its growth. We can help our students to understand that sacred texts, often invisible, govern behavior and

desire and "that standards of right or wrong do not exist apart from assumptions but follow from them" (Fish 296). And we can realize that students are more than collections of cognitive processes—they are writers whose processes and products are substantively affected by discourse communities that elicit and shape their utterance.

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1987 Richard Braddock Award

Linda Flower, John R. Hayes, Linda Carey, Karen Schriver, and James Stratman, all of Carnegie-Mellon University, are the winners of the 1987 Braddock Award for the best article on the teaching of writing to appear in *College Composition and Communication* last year. The award was presented at the Opening General Session of the Conference on College Composition and Communication annual convention in Atlanta.

The article, titled "Detection, Diagnosis, and the Strategies of Revision," was published in the February 1986 issue of *CCC.*

Geneva Smitherman-Donaldson of Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, chaired the 1987 Braddock Award Selection Committee. Members of the committee were John Hutchens, Pitt Community College; Elaine Maimon, Beaver College; Martin Nystrand, University of Wisconsin-Madison; and Mike Rose, University of California at Los Angeles.

This is the thirteenth year for the award, which honors the late Richard Braddock, University of Iowa, 1967 chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication.

1987 *TETYC* Best Article Award

Richard C. Raymond received the fifth annual *Teaching English in the Two-Year College* Best Article of the Year award. The presentation was made at the Opening General Session of the 38th Annual Convention of the Conference on College Composition and Communication in Atlanta. Raymond, associate professor of English at Armstrong State College, Savannah, Georgia, won the award for his article "Situational Analysis: Providing Answers to 'So What?'" which appeared in the October 1986 *TETYC.*

A panel of judges selected Raymond's article from among those published in *TETYC* during 1986 for its excellence in five areas: (1) content, (2) style, (3) form, (4) value to readers, and (5) overall impression. The judges were *TETYC* Editorial Advisory Board members Loren J. Williams, Mt. Hood Community College; William C. Doster, College of DuPage; Robert W. Wylie, Amarillo College; Samuel W. Whyte, Montgomery County Community College; and Audrey Roth, Miami-Dade Community College.

The award is made possible by an endowment from its founder, Nell Ann Pickett, a former member of the *TETYC* Editorial Advisory Board and a professor of English at Hinds Junior College, Raymond, Mississippi.