# Academic writing as social practice

Simple definition of a discourse community

A **discourse community** is a group of people who have texts and practices in common, whether it is a group of academics or the readers of teenage magazines. In fact, discourse community can refer to several overlapping groups of people: It can refer to the people a text is aimed at; it can be the people who read a text; or it can refer to the people who participate in a set of discourse practices both by reading and writing (Barton 1994).

Context

Sender ⟶ Message ⟶ Receiver

Code

Channel
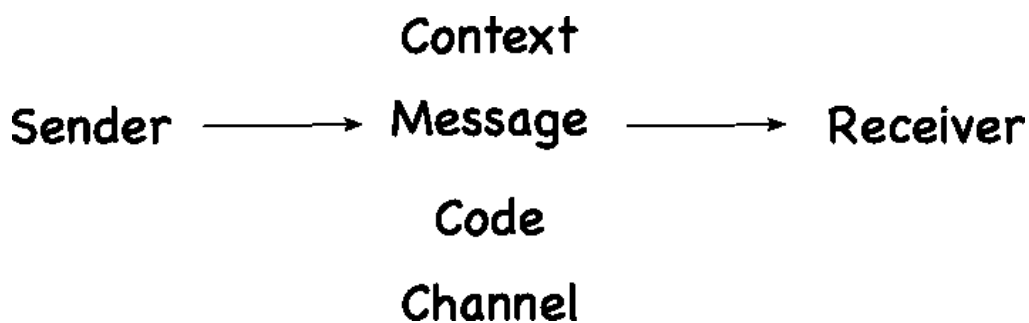
Jakobson's model of communication

Swales's definition of a discourse community

1. has a broadly agreed set of common public goals;
2. has mechanisms of *intercommunication* among its members;
3. uses its participatory mechanisms primarily to provide information and feedback;
4. utilizes and hence possesses one or more *genres* in the *communicative* furtherance of its aims;
5. has acquired some specific *lexis*;
6. has a threshold level of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and *discoursal* expertise.

Discussion: undergraduate teaching as induction into the discourse community, and implicit vs. explicit aspects of this

1. To what extent can the undergraduate programmes on which you teach be characterized as enabling and preparing the student to participate in a discourse community?
2. Does the balance of provision favour the acquisition of knowledge of community context or the achievement of fluency in the community's code?
3. To what extent does provision support context and code explicitly? To what extent are these implicitly taught within provision? In other words, to what extent are these matters that the student should pick up "as they go along" through the practice of essay-writing and working through reading lists?

Curricular implicitness of fluency in the code

> To speak with authority [our students] have to speak not only in another's voice but through another's code; and they not only have to do this, they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in, and before, at least in the terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say (David Bartholomae, quoted in Harris 1989).

Discussion: naive vs. wordly message-sending

What markers of academic community membership does the text on the right bear that its counterpart on the left lacks?

Because only a few people have most of the money and power in Australia, I conclude that it is not an equal society. Society has an Upper, Middle and Lower class, and I think that most people, when they are born into one class, end up staying in that class for their whole lives. When all three classes are looked at more closely, other things such as the differences between the sexes and people's racial backgrounds also add to the unequal nature of Australian society.

Women earn and own less than men. Why is this so?

The inequality of the distribution of wealth in Australia is yet another indicator of Australia's lack of egalitarianism. In 1985, 20% of the Australian population owned 72.2% of the wealth, with the top 50% owning 92.1% (Raskall 1988: 287). Such a significant skew in the distribution of wealth indicates that, at least in terms of economics, there is an established class system in Australia. McGregor (1988) argues that Australian society can be categorised into three levels: the Upper, Middle and Working classes. In addition, it has been shown that most Australians continue to remain in the class into which they were born (McGregor 1988: 156), despite arguments about the ease of social mobility in Australian society (Fitzpatrick 1994). The issue of class and its inherent inequity, however, is further compounded by factors such as race and gender within and across class divisions.

The relative disadvantage of women with regard to their earnings and levels of asset ownership indicates that within classes there is further economic inequity based on gender.

Discussion: entering a new discourse community

Identify a time when you had to come to terms with a new set of writing conventions. Write down any memories of your experience of doing so, any sources of support that were made available to you, and any ways you found to support yourself.

More writing for thinking: Dear Doreen

> Write a letter to one of the cultural theorists we've looked at so far, offering a positive appraisal and commentary on their work. You should discuss what you like about their work and tell them about the ways their ideas and writing have inspired you. You have **20 minutes** to do this. You can refer to past lecture notes if you wish, or ask me. Letters will be collected in at the end. The aim is for you and me to assess your understanding of some of the material we have dealt with in the course so far. Writing under pressure encourages us both to focus and reflect – two important skills.

Exercise: Free writing

Free-write for 4 minutes in response to the following question: what determines success in learning another language?

I emphasize the following:

• nothing will be read aloud;
• it's okay if your thoughts and writing take you away from the topic;
• it's important that you don't pause, edit or correct.

After the 4 minutes are up, we'll discuss any thoughts arising in pairs, and reconvene briefly for a group discussion.

References

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