

## Teaching and Assessing Discourse Communities through Cross-Curricular Portfolios

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The concept of discourse community pedagogy may find its beginnings in the 1970s with Patricia Bizzell's work on academic discourse and the first year composition student. David Bartholomae also contributed to this scholarship with his essay "Inventing the University." Since this time, the importance of discourse communities has continued to resurface in composition theory. Joseph Harris' 1990 Braddock Award winning essay "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing" delivered a powerful critique to discourse community pedagogy demonstrating how problematic the concept of discourse communities is to teachers of writing. Though Harris effectively deconstructed the perception that clear boundaries lay between them, the concept of discourse communities remains a useful metaphor for pedagogical approaches to the teaching of writing. Recently, the October 2002 issue of *English Education*, titled "Discourse Communities, Texts, and Technology in English Education," was devoted entirely to the issue of discourse communities.

The idea of the discourse community, despite Harris' dismissal of it, continues to inhabit the scholarly discourse of composition theory, yet the scholarship on discourse community pedagogy remains seriously incomplete. Research on discourse community pedagogy has yet to adequately articulate an approach to assessment. For example, a search of the MLA database cross-referencing the terms "discourse community" and "assessment" yields no results. An identical search of the ERIC database also yields no results. How are teachers of writing to assess student understanding of the concept of

discourse communities? How are teachers of writing to assess student ability to write for multiple discourse communities? In order to add to its body of theory and to ensure the continued relevance of discourse community pedagogy, we must encounter these yet unanswered questions of assessment.

In this essay, I propose that portfolio assessment is best equipped to provide a means of assessment for discourse community pedagogy. Before making this claim, however, I will provide a brief articulation of discourse community pedagogy by discussing its objectives as well as its means of accomplishing those objectives. By opening the dialogue between discourse community pedagogy and the field of portfolio assessment, I also hope to begin a process that will not only further research in both fields but also strengthen the theoretical foundations for Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) and Writing in the Disciplines (WID) movements.

### **What is Discourse Community Pedagogy?**

In her essay of the same name, Patricia Bizzell asks the question “What is a Discourse Community?” Her simple answer states that, “a ‘discourse community’ is a group of people who share certain language-using practices” (222). In this sense, the term holds many similarities to the socio-linguistic concept of “speech communities” and the literature-based concept of “interpretive communities.” Bizzell’s subsequent discussion of the concept reveals the greater complexities behind the discourse community and its “power to constitute world view” (224). From the perspective of social construction theory, the manner in which we use language determines, in fact constructs, our own “world views.” Hence, a scientist and a creative writer often see the same world through different lenses; a qualitative researcher may gather data in a

different manner as a quantitative researcher; a positivist psychometrician may grade student writing in a very different manner than an expressivist composition instructor. The language-using practices employed by different communities of individuals often create opposing world views.

From these opposing world views emerges tension within the broader academic discourse community itself in relation to the writing ability of students. In his essay, “Inventing the University,” David Bartholomae claims that “[e]very time a student sits down to write for us, he has to invent the university for the occasion – invent the university, that is, or a branch of it, like history or anthropology or economics or English” (589). Bartholomae’s point is that when we, as teachers, ask students to write for our class, we are also asking them to participate in the discourse community represented by the course’s particular content. Not only do we ask students to master the task of writing itself, but we ask them to master the ability to identify, understand, and appropriate the conventions of a particular discourse community. Students’ ability or inability to complete this enormous task leads teachers from across the curriculum to question the value and rigor of the writing program or even the English department as a whole.

Discourse community pedagogy attempts to negotiate the theoretical spaces between the world views of different language using communities. A writing teacher who uses elements of discourse community pedagogy hopes that his or her students will come to an understanding that different communities use language in a different manner, that what is valued by one community may not be valued in another, that in order to be successful within different communities a writer must appropriate the conventions of that community’s discourse and use them effectively. In order to accomplish these objectives

teachers who use discourse community pedagogy will ask students to engage in discourse analysis and write for multiple audiences and multiple purposes in order to give them practice in appropriating and using the conventions of a variety of both academic and civic discourse communities. An additional objective of discourse community pedagogy is to give students an understanding of the constructedness of discourse and the idea that our own language practices participate in the construction of world views. With this in mind, teachers using discourse community pedagogy empower student writing and lend it agency by making students aware that the discourse they create has the ability to alter and revise the hegemonic world views of the discourse communities in which they are writing, a process compatible to the radical democratic politics described by Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe in their book *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*.

### **Why Portfolios?**

As briefly stated above, the scholarship on discourse community pedagogy has avoided questions concerning assessment. The rationale and objectives of discourse community are well articulated and well researched; however, the project of identifying valid and reliable methods of assessment for these objectives has yet to begin. In this matter, discourse community pedagogy may have a lot to learn from the field of portfolio assessment.

Cross-curricular portfolios are perhaps the ideal method for assessing the objectives of discourse community pedagogy. Pat Belanoff, in an essay entitled “Portfolios and Literacy: Why?” refers to portfolios as a collection of “multi-voiced and multi-genred pieces of writing” (17). She goes on to claim that, “[p]ortfolios enable us to recognize and validate the multiple literacies that define genres as well as individuals”

(20). Belanoff's understanding of portfolios is well-suited for use in discourse community pedagogy primarily because its emphasis on preparing students to create writing for multiple discourse communities. Such a portfolio in which students display their ability to use multiple "voices" and effectively write in multiple "genres" enacts the very skills that discourse community pedagogy attempts to teach student writers. Sharon Hamilton, in "Portfolio Pedagogy: Is a Theoretical Construct Good Enough?," argues that this very aspect of portfolios makes it a valid form of assessment. "Since portfolios contain texts of various genres composed over time in a wide range of contexts for a wide range of purposes, they are more valid indicators of writing progress than other forms of assessment" (160).

Hamilton's essay also discusses the role of reflection and metacognition, two aspects of portfolio-based assessment that will prove very useful in terms of creating an approach to assessment for teachers using discourse community pedagogy. Hamilton argues that portfolios "empower" students by creating "opportunities for reflection" (159). Hamilton also articulates a connection between reflection and metacognition:

This commitment to reflective writing as an integral part of the portfolio has two interrelated benefits. First, the focus on reflection about writing forces students to distance themselves from their writing sufficiently to be able to perceive and then articulate their writerly intentions and the extent of their achievement of these intentions. This need for distance has been shown by Emily Miller and Stephen RiCharde in a study of portfolio based classrooms presented at the 1991 CCCC to tap students metacognitive skills. (160)

**Comment:** Here I must make the case that reflexive and reflective thinking is somehow connected.

Read from the perspective of discourse community pedagogy, reflective writing forces students to gain a critical distance between themselves and the conventions of the discourse community for which they are writing. Reflective writing also teaches students to engage in reflexive<sup>1</sup> thought or metacognition, a mental activity that will empower them to perceive and articulate their own subject position as a writer in relation to the subject position of the discourse community for which they are writing.

Defining metacognitive skills as those skills which help students achieve “an awareness of how they ‘do’ intellectual work” (102), Karen Mills-Courts and Minda Rae Amiran make the case for a connection between reflection, metacognition, and portfolio assessment in their article “Metacognition and the Use of Portfolios.” The authors claim that, “the first, most obvious advantage of portfolios is that they require a ‘doing; of learning that demands this intellectual self-consciousness” (102). It is “intellectual self-consciousness” that is an indicator of students’ awareness of their own thinking processes. In order to create a writing portfolio, Mills-Courts and Amiran claim

Students must be able to engage in reflexive thinking, that is, they must consciously understand their own assumptions, they must be able to analyze their assumptions as well as those of others, and they must be able to evaluate them in order to act on them. They must learn to synthesize information gained from this analytic and evaluative process into a meaningful understanding of the subject at hand. (103-4)

Perhaps not surprisingly, the process described here by Mills-Courts and Amiran is quite similar to the learning process advocated by proponents of discourse community pedagogy. First, students must analyze the conventions of a discourse community and

evaluate those conventions in order to appropriate them and acquire a “meaningful understanding” of that discourse community.

The emphasis placed by educators on reflexive and reflective thought should be anything but surprising. In the early 1900s, John Dewey defined reflective thought as the process by which, “the ground or basis for a belief is deliberately sought and its adequacy to support the belief examined” (2). In the same book, *How We Think*, Dewey also claimed “it [reflective thought] alone is truly educative” (2). Discourse community pedagogy aims to help students understand the “grounds” or “basis” for the language conventions used in different discourse communities. Only when a writer is able to understand and use these conventions, can he or she effectively participate in the creation of discourse within a particular community.

### **Once Again, Why Portfolios?**

We must now return to that question which prompted this discussion of reflective writing, reflexive thought, and metacognition in portfolio assessment. Why should we use cross-curricular portfolios to assess our students’ understanding of discourse communities? At least two aspects of portfolio assessment make it an ideal method of assessment for discourse community pedagogy.

First, since they can be comprised of multiple writing tasks for multiple audiences and for multiple purposes, cross-curricular portfolios themselves become emblematic of the many discourse communities that students encounter in their academic and civic lives. As students critically reflect on their own writing portfolios, they will have an opportunity to self-assess their ability to write for multiple discourse communities. In his or her cross-curricular portfolio, a student may see a lab report from a chemistry class, a

memo from a business class, a letter to a local politician, as well as an essay on Shakespearean drama. By examining these texts in succession, students will be encouraged to see how each text uses different conventions and functions in a different manner.

A second aspect of portfolio assessment that makes it particularly relevant to discourse community pedagogy involves the emphasis that portfolio assessment places on reflection and metacognition. As students complete their cross-curricular portfolios they will also engage in reflexive, metacognitive thought as they analyze each piece of text included. This reflection will enable them to gain critical “distance” from their own writing and critical “distance” from the discourses they used to compose each piece. Through this process, students will learn to engage in discourse analysis of their own writing, a task requiring metacognitive skills.

Although the scholarship on discourse community pedagogy has, until now, ignored the issue of assessment, this approach toward composition instruction remains an important part of the field of composition studies, as evidenced by movements such as WAC and WID. Although it is clear that further research is needed in terms of assessment and discourse community pedagogy, the field of portfolio assessment has constructed an assessment model that is perfectly equipped to accomplish the assessment tasks needed in conjunction with discourse community pedagogy in the teaching of writing. The immediate purpose of this essay is not to articulate what such an assessment would look like; instead, I do wish to begin professional dialogue between the fields of discourse community pedagogy and portfolio assessment. But such a dialogue will seem useless without a clear goal in mind, a matter that I will now address.

**More Practical Matters: What Should We Do Now?**

Many of the points made earlier in this essay may seem self-evident, even obvious. However, current practice in terms of the teaching of writing does not suggest that the concepts presented by discourse community pedagogy and portfolio assessment are being put into practice by teachers across the curriculum. If in no other area of our educational institutions does discourse community pedagogy play a major role, we should recognize its continuing impact on movements such as WAC and WID. These movements, especially Writing in the Disciplines, attempt to establish writing programs that teach students to write for multiple audiences, encourage students to see the similarities and the differences between multiple academic and non-academic discourse communities, and work to teach students to write effectively for a variety of audiences. Yet, WAC and WID programs are sometimes received with incredulity by many teachers in many academic disciplines, they are sometimes dismissed as ineffective and inefficient.

WAC and WID programs may benefit from a strengthened theoretical foundation, which discourse community pedagogy and portfolio assessment can provide. In her essay, "The Pedagogy of Writing Across the Curriculum," Susan McLeod articulates a connection between WAC/WID and discourse communities. She claims that the "notion of discourse communities is a commonplace now in the field of rhetoric and composition, but was not so obvious to composition teachers in the 1980s" (154). Since its introduction in the 1980s, however, the idea of discourse communities has helped teachers from across the curriculum negotiate the theoretical spaces between their world views. McLeod explains it like this: "In my own experience, at least, conversations with

faculty in other disciplines helped me understand the nature of the differences in disciplinary discourses” (154). Discourse community pedagogy can work to establish the educational necessity for interdisciplinary/cross-curricular/cross-discourse intellectual activity, and portfolio assessment can be used to provide authentic and educative assessment of the learning that will happen as a result of this intellectual activity.

Like discourse community pedagogy, cross-curricular portfolios can negotiate the theoretical space between different discourse communities. Even while composing and constructing the portfolios, students will see their own writing performing many different tasks, exhibiting different language conventions, and communicating to different audiences. These cross-curricular portfolios can be used by students and teachers alike in assessing the degree to which student writers “understand the nature of the differences in disciplinary discourses” (McLeod 154) as well as their ability to “gain access” to multiple discourse communities by using the language conventions particular to each.

## Notes

1. It is not the central purpose of this essay, nor is it within the scope of this essay, to fully articulate the distinction between the terms reflective and reflexive. The concepts are intimately related. Reflective thought involves the process of remembering the past, thinking about events which have already occurred. Reflexive thought is more metacognitive; it is the very thinking about the thinking process. For the purposes of this essay, I refer to reflective writing as the kind of writing students do when doing self-assessment of their own writing/thinking/learning processes by looking at writing they composed in the past. The type of thought that this activity requires I term reflexive thought.

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