Operationalizing the Concept of Discourse Community: A Case Study of One Institutional Site of Composing

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Scholars have employed a number of theoretical frames for interpreting the social dynamic in acts of composing text: constructivist relations between writers and readers, genres as situated action, systems of genres, intertextuality, and discourse communities. The latter has been disputed on philosophical grounds and has not been operationalized in concrete terms through empirical research. This study takes a systematic approach to defining and operationalizing the notion of discourse community, drawing on data from a portion of an ethnography of writing in a workplace setting. Textual dynamics and acts of composing could be seen in their fully contextualized manifestations when examined at the level of community practice. For example, a single genre varied in form and function depending on the specific discourse communities in which it was used, and writing events took on layered meanings—some practical and some symbolic—as they were viewed in relation to other communicative activities. Discourse community norms and values also established hierarchies of texts and different writing-related roles for members. The data suggest the validity of discourse community as a theoretical construct and point to the importance of anthropological approaches for studying sites of writing. In addition to theoretical implications, there are educational implications as well. If writing were fully contextualized for students and the overarching framework of discourse community were made explicit, writers would be aided in the necessary boundary crossings from one community of writing practice to another.

Increasingly since the 1980's, composition researchers have explored the salience of social context to the ways writers and writing are shaped, adding to information-processing models of composing and traditional rhetorical conceptions of audience and text. Seeing written texts and acts of composing in the context of social situations has had implications for genre theory, rhetorical theory, and composition pedagogy.

However, social context is used to refer to a variety of entities—rhetorical context, situated cognition, negotiations of meaning between a specific writer-reader pair, taxonomies of texts in relation to social systems,
McCarthy (1987) put it, “strange lands.”

The Theoretical Framework: A Notion of Discourse Community

After Hymes (1974) introduced the notion of speech community in sociolinguistics and Fish (1980) introduced interpretive community into literary discussions, the term discourse community began to crop up in composition studies to indicate, loosely, community-based norms that influence writing. Recognizing limitations of cognitivist and rhetorical conceptions of context, Bizzell (1982) first proposed the concept in composition studies:

Discourse analysis goes beyond audience analysis because what is most significant about members of a discourse community is not their personal preferences, prejudices, and so on, but rather the expectations they share by virtue of belonging to that particular community. These expectations are embodied in the discourse conventions, which are in turn conditioned by the community’s work. (p. 219)

Swales (1990), working from a sociolinguistic viewpoint, further refined what he saw as characteristic features of a discourse community. He defined discourse communities as “socio-rhetorical networks that form in order to work towards sets of common goals” (p. 9). He also made some important distinctions between speech communities and discourse communities. He noted (1) there is a difference in the distance factor (“literacy takes away locality and parochiality” [p. 24]; (2) a speech community’s primary goal is socialization and group solidarity, whereas discourse communities have communicative needs that supersede issues of solidarity or membership; and (3) “speech communities are centripetal (they tend to absorb people into that general fabric), whereas discourse communities are centrifugal (they tend to separate people into occupational or specialty-interest groups)” [p. 24]).

Two problems with the concept have been pointed out in the literature, one definitional and the other pragmatic. The definitional problem concerns isolating where or how to distinguish one community of writers from another—the boundary issue (Elbow, 1991; Harris, 1989). Discourse features from one text to another can overlap (Forter, 1986), and likewise, the features of one discourse community could overlap with another, making the boundaries blurred. And the pragmatic problem is a sort of Hegelian bind: For every theory, there is an antithesis. Positing norms for communities of writers and readers begs for its antithesis—what Harris (1989) alludes to as tensions and discontinuities in the writing practices of any community. What discourse community privileges is information on norms and patterns of communicative practice—to the possible exclu-
A Conceptualization of Discourse Community

Using the framework for analyzing discourse communities I have now laid out, I will present data gathered at one particular site of composing to seek answers to these questions:

1. What were the salient features of the discourse community under investigation that influenced or complemented writing activity?
2. What was the interrelationship of genres and the discourse community in which they were used?
3. What issues arose when writers had to learn new genres as they moved from academic contexts for writing to this professional context for writing?

Context of the Investigation

The Research Site

The year-long study was conducted at a non-profit organization, Job Resource Center (JRC), (a pseudonym), located in a large urban area. JRC's mission is to provide requisite literacy and job skills to immigrants or unskilled employees recently laid off from jobs. Although the primary focus of study was writing activities, the study nonetheless looked into the full range of communicative activities, both oral and written, at the site of study in order to see writing in the fullest possible context.

A workplace site was chosen for the purpose of examining the issue of transfer of learning from academic contexts to professional contexts of writing (Beaumont, 1995). Instances of crossing from one context for writing to another offer a unique opportunity to examine the effect of social norms on composing, as newcomers seek to understand the unfamiliar culture at hand (Berkenkotter et al., 1988; Doherty-Farina, 1989; McCarthy, 1987). The selection of a non-profit rather than a corporate site was for the purpose of studying a setting where, typically, writing is vital to raising the money needed to support the organization's activities. Fund-raising is distributed among all of the program directors at JRC, rather than in a centralized development position—another reason for desirability of the site. And in addition, after an initial visit to the site and meeting with the executive director, who was sympathetic to the research, I determined that the range of experience levels of the program directors would also afford the opportunity I was seeking to study novice versus expert behaviors and the issue of acquiring new genres.

The size of the organization was also a consideration. JRC had a staff of approximately 30 employees, 40 of whom were physically located in one building (owned by JRC) and the other 10 of whom were located in an office suite in a neighboring city. A larger institution might have limited the degree of penetration of the community and scope of observation possible during a year-long study.

Participants

After an initial visit to the site, four women were interviewed on the recommendation of the executive director. Each had a different role in the organization, but all had major writing responsibilities. In addition, two of the women were newcomers to the organization and the other two had been employees of the organization for three and five years respectively. These four women became my key informants for the study. For purposes of this report I will focus only on the two newcomers to the organization, Ursula and Pam (pseudonyms), because newcomers are most likely to stumble at the border crossings, which to oldtimers have become subliminal.

Ursula, a year out of college (an English major), was responsible for all public relations materials and the annual fundraising dinner as well as for several events put on annually for the public. She also handled almost all of the written correspondence directed to or from the institution at large and all of the executive director's correspondence. When I arrived at JRC, three months after Ursula had started working there, she was on a steep learning curve. She had done a small amount of business writing before coming to JRC in various secretarial positions, but the amount of
responsibility for written communication at JRC was much greater, a cause for both anxiety and joy for Ursula.

Pam, two years out of a Master's program in anthropology and also new to JRC, was likewise on a steep learning curve. Her job duties centered around Project Advance, a workplace literacy program JRC conducted in hotels, restaurants, and garment factories. She was familiar with business communications from her summers as an intern at IBM during college and from a short stint at an advertising agency where she wrote product promotion materials. However, her major writing responsibility at JRC was to produce a type of writing new to her, grant proposals and reports to grantees to support Project Advance.

All four managers whom I shadowed that year—Ursula, Pam, Birgittie, and Selma—estimated on-the-job writing averaged 50% of their work week. Birgittie, Ursula, and Pam also used writing for a variety of purposes outside work—writing letters to friends, journaling, doing occasional freelance writing jobs, and writing stories.

Method

Data Collection

Data collection included (1) the audio taping of open-ended interviews with each informant almost weekly for 12 months and several follow-up interviews in subsequent months, (2) the collection of a majority of the documents produced during the 12-month period, (3) the conducting of discourse-based interviews (Odell, Cosway, & Quick, 1983) in which I asked specific questions about texts they had written, (4) the audio taping of conversations between individuals about writing projects, and (5) the observation of writing activities (writers in the process of composing or meeting with colleagues to discuss writing projects), day-to-day operations of the organization (everything from posters on the walls, the position of mailboxes, and conversations at the Xerox machine and microwave where employees heated their lunches), and special events such as the annual fundraising dinner.

Although I did not directly assist with writing activities in order not to skew the data, to penetrate fully the community required that I wear the dual hats of participant and observer. I attended JRC's public functions and several staff parties and shared bits of my personal background with the participants in order to build rapport. I wove my research questions into conversations about good books, music, theater, our families, and other interests we shared in common, and when possible, conducted the interviews in the more relaxed atmosphere of a nearby cafe or restaurant. I intentionally adopted this informal approach to build the rapport necessary for getting as much of an insider's view of the community as possible. Interview data were corroborated by written texts (often numerous drafts of a given document) produced by the informants. Numerous conversations with the participants over a one-year period also enabled cross-checking for within-subjects reliability of information.

To further triangulate the data gathered from the informants, I interviewed their supervisors, people outside JRC who were recipients of the four informants' texts, and writers in other organizations who were seasoned at producing PR materials, business correspondence, and grant proposals—the types of documents most critical to JRC's fulfilling its mission. In addition to triangulating the data, this wider sphere of data collection was also essential for examining the complexities of the social context of JRC. No institution operates in complete isolation from the larger culture or separate from other institutions. As Bizzell (1982) and Harris (1989) have theorized, discourse communities in fact overlap with each other, each having unique features to itself and overlapping features shared in common with other discourse communities. Those writers external to JRC testified both to rhetorical needs of JRC's external audiences and to the characteristics of the discourse communities they shared in common. The quantities of various artifacts collected are indicated in Table 1.

Data Analysis

I began sorting sections of interview transcripts and entering coded sections into a data base under three broad categories—community, text, and writer—and a number of sub-categories. For example, under the general category "community," an initial data entry included eight sub-categories: process, values, pressure, quantity, relations, rhetoric, writing function, and technology. Further refining of the precise meanings of those categories and the interrelationships between different pieces of data led me to turn to the notion of discourse community, as Swales (1990) had defined it, as a way of making sense of the data. Eventually, through the iterative and inductive process of reading and seeking to refine the categories for analysis and keeping in mind the need to balance between being too complex and being overly reductive, I developed a variation on Swales's schema in order to interpret the data as fully as possible: influencing factors (community goals and values, material conditions, individual writers' influence) and communicative activities (modes for communication, norms for written texts, and roles for writers). Looking at the data from these vantage points enabled a sense of the whole and an understanding of some of the causal relationships among elements of the social situation under examination. Comparing interview data over the year of the study—in some cases revisiting issues from
Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of Interviews</th>
<th>Hours of Taped Interviews</th>
<th>Pages of Transcript</th>
<th>Pages of Writing Samples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Birgitte 11</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>781</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pam</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>18.0</td>
<td>268</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selma</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>12.0</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ursula</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>215</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experts</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>255</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Totals</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>65.5 hrs</td>
<td>988 pp.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results

Results describe the communal aspects of writing which the data revealed. I begin with a description of the discourse community of JRC, and then report on several overlapping discourse communities that influenced writing practices at JRC.

The Focal Discourse Community

JRC's mission as a community-based, non-profit provider of job-training and job-related literacy training, requires that the organization accomplish three overarching goals: 1) to conceptualize and implement solid training and job placement programs—ones that give JRC a niche among a number of competent and competitive vocational and language-training service providers, 2) to raise over $3 million annually to fund the programs, and 3) to create visibility and good-will among its constituencies so that there is both a clientele and a climate of political/social support. All communication at JRC, both oral and written, stems from these three goals.

Based on these institutional goals, then, the stakes were high for some of the texts written at JRC. Specifically, texts that directly related to raising money for the organization—grant proposals, program reports to grant makers, and letters of intent to explore funding with private foundations—received the most attention and were authored by the most senior members of the community. If the proposal was a major request ($100,000 or more), the executive director would be involved in writing the document, along with the program director, and in the case of large grant requests to federal agencies ($500,000 or more) the executive director might hire a professional grant writer to help with the project. The amount of information needed for a federal grant proposal and the number of supporting documents required would also entail involving as many as five or six JRC employees in the research, drafting, and proofing stages of writing. Or, in the case of letters of request to major donors, two or three board members, as well as the executive director and a subordinate, might be involved in crafting what the letter would say. Grant requests for small sums would be handled by the program directors without much involvement from the executive director and generally took much less time to write. The executive director seldom wrote either, less significant texts such as thank you letters, goodwill letters, or internal documents. These documents, carrying less of the burden for JRC's survival, were written by employees lower in the organization.

Figure 2 depicts the hierarchical relationship among the ten genres I observed being written at JRC, based on how important the purpose and constituency receiving the document were to the organization's goals. The number of people involved with the production of a text—and at what levels in the organization—was in direct proportion to its significance to the organization's goals.

Internal communications, while carrying less relative importance to the organization's survival, nonetheless were shaped both by the material conditions of the agency and by the organization's goals and values as well. At the main office, where 40 of the 50 employees worked, physical proximity and a small staff enabled much day-to-day business to be carried out face-to-face. For a full description of the material conditions for writing at JRC, see Beaufort (1995, in press). Colleagues were met in the hallway by chance, or someone could easily be sought out in an office or the central computer room. Information was exchanged in front of the building by smokers taking a break or across the street at the cafe over coffee or lunch. Pam said to me, "Hanging out. Passing each other in the halls. That's how information gets transmitted" (Fam, 8/11/92, p. 4).

Managers held regular staff meetings as well—sometimes weekly, sometimes every other week—and much internal work was negotiated one-on-one. Leong, the executive director of JRC when I began the research project, explained to me.
clients. There were few visual signs of status within the organization. Except for the executive director and a few of the program managers, other employees' desks were in a bullpen arrangement, and computers were shared among all employees. This ethos and the organizational structure also contributed to the preference for oral rather than written communications among employees. Over the period of the year at the site, my informants wrote relatively few internal memos. The preponderance of writing was done for external audiences.

In her first few months at JRC, Pam did not realize the norms for internal discourse, though. Here is her reflection to me after six months in the organization:

Memos. People hate them. “Aw, another memo!” I've heard all these comments, although when I first came here, I just figured that everyone just writes memos because they have to have a paper trail. I mean I figured since we have all these ... (job) counselors took me aside and just said, “I don't want to ever see another damned memo on my desk. You have something to say, you come and talk to me about it.” I was just like going, “Oh, hmm, I sure didn't divine the culture of this organization very well.” (Pam, 8/11/92, p. 4)

At IBM, where Pam had worked summers during college, the interoffice memo was a routine literacy event treated no more ceremoniously than the morning cup of coffee. But at JRC, as she quickly found out, institutional norms dictated an altogether different significance to memos, which were written only occasionally and usually only when something needed to be documented for future reference or for legal purposes. Pam having to learn how to position memos at JRC and what meaning they carried as literacy events within this community is indicative of the idiosyncratic nature of discourse practices at one institution compared to another.

But then within one institution, there can also be conflicting values, and as a result, conflicting roles for textual practices. Pam told me of a discussion that occurred during an all-day staff retreat that reflects the organization's seeking to define its culture:

There was a big debate over what metaphor we should use to see ourselves. Are we a family, or are we a company? I think there's still some tension about that because we all want to be very compassionate and liberal and like a family and take care of each other. But at the same time everybody really wants us to be more like a corporation and be professional and formalize and have systems and goals. (Pam, 3/2/94, p. 4)

On another day during our conversation, Pam suddenly made a direct link between the internal culture at JRC and writing:
Since we're so small and we're like a family, people sort of view writing in two ways. One is they feel threatened because something's down on paper, and it's like, "Oh no. This is..." Like when it's codified, it's somehow a threat. Or, that it's a way of being efficient. If we were a corporation people would have no problem with a memo or a note. But here there's... this attitude towards memos, like, "Why? Why did you have to write this and you couldn't tell me?" 'Cause if you're a family you just see each other around the house and just mention things. But if you're more of a corporation, there has to be some kind of formalized system. (3/16/93, pp. 1-2; emphasis added)

Over time, understanding the fundamental and conflicting cultural values within JRC led Pam to shift her rhetorical stance in memos, as well as decisions about whether to write them in the first place:

Before I would just write a memo, and it would just go out and that would be the end of it. But now I realize how much I have to follow up on it, 'cause now the kind of memos I write it's like, "Well, this is to inform you of something, and we'll talk about it later." You know, whereas before it was like, "This is what I need. Give it to me." [laughs]. (Pam, 4/20/93, p. 6)

She not only altered her tone in memos; she also started to write them in informal typefaces or by hand to give them a less formal appearance. The norms for the genre of the interoffice memo at JRC were different from those at IBM.

There was one instance of a JRC employee being fired while I was at the site, in part because she could not mesh her role as communicator with the institution's norms for communication. Other members of the community told me she was guilty, among other things, of holing up in her cubicle and writing endless internal memos rather than meeting with people face-to-face. What this employee did not grasp was that the genre of the memo existed within and was interpreted by a social organism. A memo rarely existed on its own, without some face-to-face communication. One additional comment, made a few months later by Pam, again indicates the integral relation between talking and memos at JRC:

It was like all this talk, talk, talk, talk... just to produce this one little memo saying, "This is what the person's status is. Please pay them." I had to spend two months negotiating all these different things with all these different people... and then I thought, this is really how it is in business, you know? Who cares about just - I could just - I could write the most clear memo, but if somebody doesn't agree with it or they find one little flaw, then I'm going to have to change it all over again [laughs]. (Pam, 8/5/93, pp. 16-17)

The organization valued face-to-face consensus building. No internal writing could be successful without an oral counterpart.

This preference for oral communications within JRC also influenced the ways in which writing was accomplished, even if the text was intended for an external audience. There was extensive talk associated with the creation of any important text—from the brainstorming stages, through successive drafts, editing, and proofreading. Program directors and the executive director would help each other figure out approaches to grant proposals before anything got written down and the person responsible for creating the document would routinely seek feedback from co-workers as successive drafts were written.

Any extensive feedback from the executive director to a subordinate on a piece of writing was always oral as well. Here is a portion of the transcript of a typical oral response to a draft of a text. In this five-minute session Mei, Leong's successor as executive director of JRC, gave Pam feedback on a first draft of the speech Pam was going to deliver to the city council that evening. The speech was for the purpose of adding support to the written grant proposal from JRC already before the council for consideration. Pam was sitting at the computer. Mei stood beside Pam and read the three paragraphs Pam had printed out. This is the beginning of her response.

Mei: Um, I think the first thing, it's good, what we're doing, employment training model, and um, we could say "created the model, working closely with small business and hotels." We don't have to say [inaudible] "labor community." Instead of saying "unemployed immigrant" we should say - um, we should say ah "low income."

Pam: So use the language of the

Yeah,

Yeah,

Mei: we should use their language=
Pam: =OK.
Mei: "Low income residents, /mhm/unemployed individuals, and immigrants"/Mm hhm/uh=
Pam: =All that? OK. [laughs]
Mei: You know, when you speak=
Pam: =Uh huh
Mei: =You don't have to be so coherent on the grammar=
Pam: =Yeah, that's true.

And you want to hit them on these things/cause, you know, they're going to be listening to a hundred people, so what's going to make you stand out=
Pam: =Right.
Mei: What's going to make you stand out is this grant. I th--we should just say the um, we don't have to say the amount, 'cause they don't/mhm/they don't care/mhm/you should say "The amount that you have recommended for Project Advance um, will not - will not be able to maximize our potential"=
Pam: =Oh, OK (10/8/92)
Mei was guiding Pam on what points to emphasize, reminding her of the context of the council meeting, where a long lineup of speakers would bombard the council members with their requests. During the course of the next three hours Pam would spend polishing her speech, she would also consult two co-workers in her office and Birgitte, downstairs, who was also preparing a speech for the council meeting that evening, taking suggestions she liked, rejecting others. Written texts at JRC evolved in large part out of office talk. A set of interrelated factors—cultural values and organizational goals—drew the relationships between oral and written communications, established site-specific norms for texts such as the inter-office memo, and dictated the ways in which writers were expected to accomplish writing and the specifics of writing-related tasks.

**Overlapping Discourse Communities, Shared Practices**

JRC's goals and mission were not the sole arbiter of how and when writing occurred within the organization, however. Norms of larger social entities had to be taken into account as well. Beyond the specifics of an immediate rhetorical situation—a letter congratulating President-elect Clinton on his election victory, or an invitation to a senator to speak at the annual fund-raising dinner—were an overarching set of norms for communication that were intricately tied to the very purposes and existence of larger aggregates of institutions—the American business culture, or federal or local governmental institutions for example. The goals and values of those entities led to decisions about what was communicated (or not communicated) in writing from JRC to members of those communities and led to norms for genres JRC's writers needed to follow. Or as Bizzell (1982) and Harris (1989) have postulated, discourse communities in fact overlap. Figure 3 represents the overlapping social entities writers at JRC had to take into account in order to communicate successfully. (Note: Circles could be layered onto other circles in the figure. For example, the news media could be considered a subset of the workforce community. But Figure 2 represents those social entities that were most important to JRC's ongoing communications.) Ursula showed me a letter one day written to a tenant who had broken a lease agreement with JRC. She talked about the "psychology" behind the letter, which was Ursula's term to indicate the strategic business transaction she was watching her boss orchestrate via the letter:

Dear [Client]:

Congratulations on your move to a new, expanded facility. All of us at JRC are proud of you and your success.
In this case the genre of the business letter spans many institutional sites, perhaps even cultures. Or do American businesses who interact globally write letters differently depending on the country or culture in which the letter will be received? Again, the question is whether the theoretical unit of analysis allows similarities and differences in textual practices to be perceived. In American business values of politeness, deference in accord with social rank (e.g., never in the closing to a letter ask someone of higher rank to initiate a call), appeals to individuals’ self-interest, and leaving sensitive matters implied or unsaid ensures that multiple and often conflicting purposes can be achieved in face-saving ways and in ways that also protect individuals and institutions legally, as Leong pointed out.

One more example within the business community, letters of request—a sub-genre of the business letter—was given a lot of attention at JRC and gives another indication of the complicated social relations and interconnected web of communicative activities in which the genre played a part. Barbara, a public relations specialist who was on the board of JRC, was sometimes involved in editing important letters JRC sent out—those requesting a gift from a potential benefactor or letters to invite the politician to be the featured speaker at a fund-raising event. One day she explained to me her point of view on the social etiquette connected with letters of request:

Barbara: Normally you wouldn’t even write the letter without having a phone conversation or some kind of personal conversation first to tell you whether you can go ahead and write the letter and expect a yes. Don’t ask unless you know the answer is yes.

Anne: What’s the thinking behind that?

Barbara: Well, it’s a face-saving thing. There’s something to be said for not letting people get used to just becoming the least bit comfortable with saying no, there’s something to be said for that philosophically and psychologically. Now the letter, even though you know that you’re going to get a positive response, the letter still has to be very strategically written. They need to show their decision makers to reinforce why they have already said yes to me. When it comes back down to them reinforcing their own bottom line, then that’s what this request letter needs to do.

Anne: So then the actual writing, what are your guidelines for the actual writing?
Barbara: Well my guidelines, first of all, my first paragraphs are always short. I write first paragraphs as if I were writing a press release. They're very short and they're right to the point. I always start out by saying, "I am writing to request," I don't beat around the bush... so by the time they've read the first sentence of the first paragraph they know what I'm asking for. The second paragraph, again, I almost follow a press release format. I guess if I think about it because it's an interplay, it's an interplay of information. My second paragraph will always go into the reasons they should say yes... and then the third paragraph is supporting information and then in the close there has to be this call to action... an answer by a certain time, and this is the mode, and then you follow through. (9/10/94 field notes, emphasis added)

Barbara's explication of the genre features of the request letter and samples she showed me of letters she'd written for her clients reiterates norms for discourse in the business community—the interplay of oral and written communication, the upholding of social decorum and status, and the value placed on efficiency (a request letter should rarely exceed one page, Barbara stressed).

The struggles of a newcomer to a discourse community can be equally instructive in highlighting what insiders to the community know. At first Ursula did not understand those norms for letters of request and the cultural meanings behind those norms. One of the first request letters Ursula wrote when she joined JRC—an invitation to the Secretary of Labor to speak at JRC's fund-raiser—did not exhibit features of a good request letter. Ursula struggled with where to position the request. The draft done by a co-worker had the request in the first sentence—"JRC would be honored if you would be our keynote speaker." Ursula moved the request to the last sentence of a very long introductory paragraph about JRC:

JRC, a non-profit job training and employment placement organization, is planning to celebrate its... year of service on Wednesday, September 23, 1992 at our Annual Fund-Raising Dinner... since our inception in... JRC has placed over 8,000 immigrants, refugees, and unemployed Americans in full-time jobs. In the current economic climate, JRC's mission to provide employment to the disadvantaged is particularly relevant. In order to bring greater visibility to the objectives of our organization, JRC will be spotlighting the current labor market and the importance of training at our... Annual Fund-Raising Dinner. We would be honored if you would consider being the Annual Fund-Raising Dinner's keynote speaker. Your presence at JRC's... Annual Fund-Raising Dinner would be invaluable to our organization.

But her comment to me indicates her uncertainty about the norms of the genre:

[The request] seemed too abrupt in the [draft I was given], to be the first sentence, though probably, you know, practically it should have been closer to the front just because it's not likely that her assistants are going to read this whole thing, and it may just look like we're trying to, you know, we're just sending them information about JRC. So I did think about that... If I wasn't going to follow up right away with a phone call, then I would have put it closer to the beginning. But I wanted to give her a little idea of what we are, how long we've been around, who we help, and that in order to bring more money... and visibility to this organization, it would help if you would come and speak for us. (7/28/92, pp. 9-10; emphasis added)

In the second and third paragraphs Ursula wanted to get the reader to see how she would benefit from doing the favor. She explained to me,

We know she's a [President George] Bush woman, so we'll put in that, you know, that she could talk about Bush's thing and do a little pre-campaign promo for her guy who's given her so much help. (Ursula, 7/29/92, p. 10; emphasis added)

Although she understood the need for stating the benefit to the speaker of accepting the request, an examination of her draft shows she stated the benefits in rather oblique terms and most of this information came after two lengthy paragraphs extolling JRC's achievements. Gradually, with coaching from Barbara, Leong, and Mei, Ursula came to realize the norms for the genre—the ways in which the requisite rhetorical moves and structure supported the overall communications process in American business. Her understanding of the social dynamics, the norms of communication, and the genre is evidenced six months later, when she was handling all communications for the job fair.

She needed to line up speakers and donations for the event. She recounted to me that while in the middle of writing something for another project, it occurred to her that she had a friend who worked in a bakery chain. She stopped and called him to see if he could arrange a donation of morning pastries. The tone of the letter written as a follow-up to the phone call was quite different from her letters six months before. Here is how the letter begins:

We are writing to request your store [name], to donate pastries for 400 people on Saturday, June 5. On this day, JRC will host its second annual Career Day conference. The purpose of Career Day is to prepare Asian and Pacific Islander high school students for their entrance into the workforce... Career Day promises to be a highly visible event. Congressional representative [name] and [local council representative] are among the invited speakers. As donors to the event, [baking company] would receive
acknowledgment on all flyers, programs, press releases and in our quarterly newsletter, which reaches over 2,000 business, political leaders, news reporters and community organizations.

We look forward to a positive response. (emphasis added)

She commented to me about this letter and the others she wrote for the event:

Ursula: This was a lot easier than the annual dinner.
Anne: Why were they easier?
Ursula: Most of the people I was writing to had some kind of phone conversations with. They knew me enough. They, I wasn’t too intimidated by any of the people I was writing to, I felt that they were willing to do it anyway. (Ursula, 7/20/93, p. 10; emphasis added)

For the first time, Ursula had taken the step of making personal contact with many of the people she was requesting help from. Having established these relationships and having paved the way for a “yes” response, the request letters were now playing their intended role in the mix of oral and written communication normally followed in the discourse community of American business.

There were also other sub-genres of the business letter, unlike the letter of request, which were ritualized into a standard form letter (Johns, 1989). In January, six months into her job at JRC, Ursula told me she had created sub-directories in her computer for different sub-genres (my term) for the business letter: TY (thank you letters), PR (public relations letters), Meetings (letters about meetings), Board (letters to board members), rejection letters (people applying for jobs). When an occasion arose that required a “standard” letter (Ursula’s term), Ursula would go to her computer file and draw on an old letter as a template for the new letter. These more ritualized instances of communication via the business letter, unlike the letter of request, also seldom required the added dimension of oral communication. Their purposes within the discourse community—relaying information, or politeness—could be accomplished independent of other forms of communication.

Looking at instances of the use of one genre—the business letter—within JRC, one of many institutional sites within the larger institutional aggregate of American businesses, gives just one instance of a complex web of communicative practices that a full-scale study of American business might reveal. For purposes of this study, looking at American business (as unique from, say, Japanese business communications) as an entire communications system—i.e., as discourse community—has illuminated and situated individual rhetorical acts and the function and features of

one genre shared in common by that aggregate community of American businesses (1989).

Overlapping Discourse Communities, Differing Practices

I turn now to two other institutional sites, again external to JRC but with whom JRC was closely connected, for another view of the ways in which writing activities can be understood at the discourse community level. JRC receives approximately 80% of its funding through federal and local government grants, and at the top of the list of important genres a program manager at JRC needs to know is the grant proposal. But like the simple gesture of a wink in Geertz’s (1973) essay on interpreting cultures, the genre of the grant proposal takes on different purposes and different forms in two similar but different institutional sites—that of the Department of Education of the U.S. government and city government in JRC’s locale—another example of the interplay of communicative practices within social entities. Again, the data are not meant to typify discourse community features for all government agencies, nor do the data give the full range of communicative practices of those entities. I present instead a view of two particular institutions involved in awarding grants to agencies like JRC and the differing practices associated with a shared genre, the grant proposal.

I watched Pam beginning to wrestle with the norms for communications in two other social entities JRC interfaced with, both new writing situations for her. Her struggle revealed the often invisible norms of discourse communities and the largely tacit knowledge held by those well-ensconced in the community of practice. Within a few months on the job Pam had demonstrated her facility with writing and her ability to learn rapidly. Mei brought her in on a collaborative writing project to apply for a $3 million three-year grant from the U.S. Department of Education. Here is Pam’s description of the project:

I wrote one section of the proposal, and it was um - it was really hard because it was such a deadline and such pressure to it. It was the first time I’d ever done it, so I just wrote everything out there, and I just said, “Well, you guys fix it.” So they did, and they cut and redid it. (Pam, 7/14/92, p. 2; emphasis added)

Here is the comment of Donald (pseudonym), the professional grant writer JRC hired to help with the project, who edited Pam’s work on that section of the proposal:

I’m sure she was looking at the lingo in these things and then sort of trying to emulate it, which is, I think, based on my own experience in learning how to write these things, that’s, that’s what I did too. ... sort of trying to
The deeper level Donald is referring to is the role of the genre within a particular social entity—in this case the Department of Education—and the norms for the genre peculiar to that discourse community. Again, it is beyond the scope of this study to determine if the norms for the genre of the grant proposal show similarities across all federal agencies of the U.S. government or not. But those I interviewed both within JRC and outside the organization who had applied for grants from a number of federal agencies tended to speak of those experiences in reference to a single genre, "the federal grant proposal." So for the rest of this explanation of the data, I will refer to the genre and the social entity using the terminology and distinctions my informants did.

Leong and Donald, both holding Ph.D.'s, told me how difficult it was to grasp the genre of the federal grant proposal. Donald said, "I was scared by them for a few years, just—like how could I possibly even compete for something like this that looks so complicated?" (Donald, 2/25/93, p. 10). A program officer for the U.S. Department of Education, Jane, concurred with Donald's view in a phone interview: "Writing for a federal grant is not like any other kind of writing" (10/5/94 field notes).

The communications process for awarding federal grants begins with the request for proposal (RFP). The RFP is a genre itself, rooted in congressional law. Once a bill is passed in Congress, the appropriate government agency (in this instance the Department of Education) translates the law into a RFP that will enable the agency to fulfill the mandate of the bill. Agency lawyers will review the RFP carefully to assure it accurately fulfills its legal obligations and will create as objective a means for evaluating grant proposals as possible.

As a result of these discourse community goals, the RFP is laden with jargon. Another professional grant-writer, Anna, told me. "The thing to realize when you're writing a government proposal is that governments speak in code. In order to be understood by everybody, they're understood by practically nobody" (Anna, 1/19/93, p. 1). So one of the tasks of the grant writer was to decipher the codes of the RFP. Donald commented,

If you look at that RFP, I mean what's the difference between... program factors and program plan? Give me a break... I finally figured out what that was by looking at what other people had written. Well, the people that got funded wrote about this kind of stuff in that section, so I guess that's what I'll do." (Donald 2/25/93, p. 24)

Federal RFPs also required lengthy responses. The initial RFP Pam and Donald were working from contained seven sections, with 39 subsections. A glance at the number of the subsections appeared to overlap or be repetitive. Yet each subsection of the RFP had to be addressed, for three external evaluators would eventually rate each section of the proposal, check sheet in hand, noting whether the requirements spelled out in that subsection had been fulfilled and awarding points accordingly. The particular grant proposal I saw Donald, Mei, and Pam working on ended up with 60 pages of narrative and supporting documents adding another 60 pages to the package.

Initially, not understanding distinctions between sections of the RFP, Pam would just "write everything on everything... and then later... go back and compare it with the RFP and see if it really goes there" (Pam, 7/14/92, p. 5). A year later, having worked on another major proposal to the federal government and having attended a meeting in Washington with grant program managers, Pam could articulate to me a much deeper understanding of how the sections of the proposal fit together and her systematic approach to writing each section.

I'll write the "program factors" first. 'Cause that's sort of like, um, a skeleton of the whole project... then the "extent of need" for the project is to really set up the reader to feel like, "Wow, somebody's got to get in there and help..." 'cause 'quality of training' and the "plan of operation" sort of gets written at the same time. 'Cause training is the heart of your plan." (Pam, 8/23/94, pp. 3-4)

Pam also knew to gauge how much importance to attach to a section based on the number of points that could be awarded to that section on a 100-point rating scale. She knew what jargon was critical and what could be left aside for the sake of clear communication.

If they ask you for "individualized educational plans," it doesn't matter if you do that just means, well, I meet with students regularly and we have teacher-counselors for student interviews. It doesn't matter whatever you call it, you gotta call it what they call it here otherwise you're gonna think you're not doing it, they're gonna think you're doing some weird thing... Individualized curriculum, formative and summative evaluation... we just read the literature on workplace literacy and the stuff that everyone always says you say too, so that people don't think you're a complete idiot and you've never read anything." (Pam, 8/23/94, p. 7, emphasis added)

Graphics were another feature of the genre that were a response to the underlying values of the discourse community. Using charts gave what Donald called "face validity": "It makes it look more official and technocratic and 'Gee, these people really - really know how to plan stuff' cause they know how to make all these charts." (Donald, 2/25/93, p. 19). Pam made a similar observation about the use of lists in the text. She said, "It
books better because then they go, 'Oh, they have a specific list of goals...'

gives them something to sorta check off, you know?' (Tam, 5/18/93, p. 3). Both of these textual features followed from the federal government's goal of objectivity and impartiality in awarding grants.

At least in JRC's experience with the U.S. Department of Education, formal communication between grant requester and grant maker was normally limited only to answering technical questions. During the year I gathered data, the U.S. Department of Education program officer did call the meeting of all award recipients for purposes of evaluating workplace literacy programs. So Pam had an unusual opportunity to meet her grant administrator and other program managers like herself who had written successful grants. Or, in Donald's case, he gained further knowledge of the communicative practices of the U.S. Department of Education when he was invited, as subject matter expert, to serve as evaluator of grants for a vocational training program. But these instances of face-to-face contact were the exception. Normally, texts from JRC to the Department of Education were the only form of communication between the two entities.

The grant proposal was a document of extreme importance—it served as a kind of golden fleece by which the federal agency could give equal opportunity to institutions across the country vying for federal funds. Table 2 summarizes the discourse community features of the U.S. Department of Education as evidenced in the data—according to the four features of discourse communities I have identified.

As Table 2 also shows, the norms for communication with city government in JRC's locale varied considerably from U.S. Department of Education norms. The RFP was shorter, and the proposals in response were also shorter. A typical proposal from JRC to the city's agency distributing Community Block Grants was 25 pages long, compared to 120 pages for a federal proposal. But most important, the proposal itself was only the beginning move in a highly political process of gaining funding. Oral communication between Mei and members of city council or city bureaucrats was the mode for final negotiations to secure a city grant.

Initially, Pam had some trouble writing city proposals as she did with federal proposals. Her first city proposal was a week-long effort. Language in the RFP was confusing, and sections of the RFP seemed to overlap. Pam had attended the bidders' conference the Mayor's office had held a few weeks earlier, but she was still not altogether sure what the various sections of the RFP called for. Following the meeting with Mei, Pam would produce three more drafts. Whole chunks of text were moved from one section to another. The overlaps among the eight categories left a lot of room to maneuver. Mei edited some of the wording to take out some colloquial expressions Pam had used and to incorporate
appropriate phraseology. Pam spent a half day dealing with charts and forms that had to be filled out. Finally, the deadline came and there was not time to perfect the text any more. Three copies were made and hand-delivered to the appropriate agency. The text itself was only 28 pages long.

But the grant-seeking process did not end there. After the staff of the Mayor’s Office of Community Development reviewed the proposal and wrote a one-page recommendation regarding funding, the proposal was forwarded to the Citizens Committee, a twenty-member panel of private citizens appointed by the mayor. They read the proposals, negotiated any changes they felt should be made in the staff recommendations, and prepared a public document summarizing their recommendations. JRC’s proposal was recommended for funding, but at $67,000 instead of the $113,000 requested.

At this point the process moved into the political arena. Mei got on the phone to the head of the Mayor’s Office of Community Development, explaining the need for the full amount of funding requested. She had Pam prepare a letter to a member of the city council with whom Mei had close connections. A few weeks later, the Mayor and the Citizens Committee held a public hearing for organizations who wished to appeal the funding decisions. Some hundred non-profit groups sent a representative to the hearing. Pam was in the city council chambers at City Hall at 5 P.M. to get in line for her allotted three minutes before the Committee. She had started at 10 A.M. and worked her way through eight drafts of her speech, getting input from coworkers and Mei, and ultimately preparing an outline to speak from.

A year later, Pam repeated the process of writing the proposal for continued funding of her program through city agencies. The writing process changed dramatically, given what Pam had learned about the norms for communication within the local city government. She assigned a staff member under her to go through the previous year’s proposal and note changes that needed to be made in light of the new RFP. Pam incorporated those changes into the text, made a few other additions, and sent it off. The whole proposal was completed in an eight-hour day, compared to the five days she had spent on the proposal the year before. Here is her reflection on the difference from the process the year before:

Last year I was really excited because I was really idealistic, and I wanted to show that we had this good model and that it really was meeting people’s needs and - and this year I was more critical and I just thought, “Well, yeah.” Well, I was thinking it doesn’t really matter anyway because it’s this political game that the citizens’ committee plays, and it’s gonna have to do with Mei’s political clout in getting the funding than it is in our writing it. (Pam, 7/20/93, pp. 2-3; emphasis added)

What Pam had learned was that the funding usually remains stable from year-to-year on these local government grants as long as the agency delivers what it promised the year before. And text is only a starting place in the whole process. After the initial review of the text by local bureaucrats, text becomes only one element in a complicated political bargaining process. So Pam knew she could make just minor modifications to the previous year’s text and send it off. There was no need to create the “perfect” grant proposal, or one even close in length and complexity to a U.S. Department of Education proposal. As long as the city proposal lent face validity to JRC’s request and was accompanied by the appropriate verbal interactions, the text would have fulfilled its job. The knowledge she had gained, in a year’s time, was knowledge of the ways in which the text served the overall communications process of the discourse community.

Charles, who was second in command at the Mayor's Office of Community Development, reiterated to me the role of text in this discourse community when I spoke with him:

Some folks come with perceptions that if they lobby hard politically, it doesn’t really matter what they put down on paper . . . it does make a difference - you know, we have to see something on paper, you know that can justify - I mean I’m not to say that . . . politics are not, are not an issue at all but I mean norm commonly if it’s not a sound proposal it doesn’t make it past first couple of level. (Charles, 6/9/93, p. 4; emphasis added)

But on the other hand, he said,

We have a number of situations where existing agencies do not write the best proposals, but by the weight of their services that they’ve provided we will give a little bit more . . . consideration to them. (Charles, 6/9/93, p. 5; emphasis added)

In between the lines Charles was confirming what Pam had surmised: The written text was only a starting place in the negotiation process for receiving a grant though city agencies. The formal features of the city grant proposal and the function of the document was in direct relationship to two conflicting purposes within the discourse community: On the one hand there was a goal to level the playing field (i.e., distribute funds equitably to social agencies, much like the U.S. Department of Education’s aim.) But on the other hand the discourse community also existed as a power broker. Elected officials were seeking the votes and positioning to continue in office and wield influence; voters (individuals) and voting blocks (organizations) were seeking to use their voting power to negotiate an exchange of services. In this light the production and use of the city grant proposal made sense.

Looking at JRC’s interface with these two different governmental entities revealed different goals and standards for a genre shared in com-
Matters of correct etiquette with business letters were a continuing stumbling block for Ursula. What may seem like a simple matter of phrasing or style is in fact a linguistic issue tied to a set of social goals. For example, in a letter to the local congresswoman who had just been re-elected for another term Ursula had written:

On behalf of JRC, I wish to extend our congratulations to you for retaining your seat in the House of Representatives. We look forward to two more years of your representation in Congress...

Mei crossed out “retaining your seat” and wrote in “a splendid victory.” Ursula was able to laugh about that:

Yeah, that sounds like she just made it [laughs]. Lucky you, didn’t get kicked out of office. See. I have that almost kind of dry way of writing sometimes, and I’m just the facts ma’am, and she’s good with… saying things a little bit more flowery, you know, in a way that’s more acceptable. (Ursula, 1/12/93, p. 1)

Ursula’s characterizing her writing as “dry” and “I’m just the facts ma’am” suggest a closely-held value from a different discourse community.

The press release, another genre with symbolic functions in an intricate web of professional relationships, also presented challenges for Ursula. Press releases should enable news editors quick access to news so that it can be passed along to the public with as little rewriting as possible. That is the ideal. However, in reality, press releases are issued for symbolic purposes as well—not necessarily to get an item in the news, for the organization’s news may not be that newsworthy, but to build awareness over time of the organization’s activities and the social issues it is concerned with.

When I first talked to Ursula about press releases, she commented: “It’s a style I’m not comfortable with, it’s kind of, I don’t know, cheery, sort of phony sounding” (Ursula, 9/1/92, pp. 2-3). Ursula’s discomfort with what she referred to at various times as “cheery,” “phony sounding,” “rah-rah” language, or “schmoozy stuff,” stemmed from her training in the university, where she’d been schooled to give facts and evidence for purposes of an intellectual argument. Business letters, in contrast, were designed primarily to build social relationships and meanings were often implied rather than stated. And press releases, a genre also used in business, had a particular rhetorical slant—emphasizing the positive about an organization—that Ursula felt at times came across as “phony.”

Near the end of a year of following Ursula, I asked her to reflect on the differences she saw between writing in academic institutions and writing
in business as she looked back over some college papers she had shared with me. Her comment suggests norms and purposes for academic writing that were in sharp contrast to much of the writing she was doing at JRC. She said:

“I’m much more comfortable with academic writing because this paper’s so dry it’s so boring to read. The Genesis one… it’s really boring to read but I thought about every single word that I wrote for these papers… I had my thesaurus and my dictionary and I chose the right words to be really succinct and get to my point… in social writing, business writing… not a letter about doing work and asking for the Secretary of Labor to speak at an annual dinner… I’m very uncomfortable with that kind of writing, but if I were to explain to him about Genesis, it’d be more fun… I don’t know the etiquette of doing that without being offensive… there aren’t words in the dictionary to look up in the thesaurus that would say it just right.” (Ursula, 8/15/93, pp. 12-13; emphasis added)

Her comment reflects again a discomfort with the social relationships that must be carefully handled through business writing and a much higher comfort level with the more impersonal or distant stance of academic writing.

If viewed through the lens of discourse community practices, the evaluative comments Ursula made about language and norms for writing in certain business contexts suggests that she brought a different set of communicative practices from another discourse community to JRC. She made steady improvement over the course of the year I followed her in mastering the genre of the request letter and the press release. She was sensitive to language and constantly scanned her environment for clues about expectations. However, deeply-ingrained beliefs from years in another discourse community were not easily parted with. Even after a year at JRC, Ursula still felt herself more closely allied to academic norms for written language.

In two instances Pam also commented on some tension points for her in seeking to bridge between different genres and discourse communities. First, there was the issue of conciseness. Pam said,

“I’ve never been concise, and I’ve never valued conciseness. I value clarity, so I tend to over-explain things, so that there is no shadow of a doubt, you know… It’s been spelled out visually. I’ve explained every detail and history. And if you don’t understand it, you know, you’ve got problems.”

(Pam, 7/20/93, pp. 4-5)

In business writing, brevity is essential, so co-workers would cut out the excess verbiage in Pam’s writing that was uncomfortable cutting. Pam never articulated the source of this deeply-held value of over-explaining, but it was one that immersion in a new community, with different norms for discourse, did not erase.

She also had been schooled in her M.A. program in anthropology in writing ethnography, which requires the writer to render through details in order to establish the validity of a point. In a first draft of an opening to a grant proposal, she indulged in a bit of descriptive writing. She wrote:

The wily old man waits patiently for the bell to ring, his brown hands twisting around his cane. When the children come out of the school, his granddaughter finds him in the same spot he occupies each day. They join the rest of the grandparents and parents picking up their children and wait for the slow #27 bus back to their neighborhood. The scenery changes: freeways, overpasses, and warehouses give way to pawn shops, drug dealers, Cambodian markets, soup kitchens and Vietnamese noodle houses. Back home, big siblings are trying to entertain their baby brothers and sisters in crowded tenement hallways. Mothers are returning from the sewing factories with bags of piecework to sew for extra money. Some fathers are on their way out to the night shifts at warehouses or factories. In this inner city, multi-ethnic context, barriers to English literacy are many. A program seeking to address these barriers must consider that a new kind of family and community is forming in this urban crucible, and the most effective solutions will come from those who understand this community.” (emphasis added)

She told me she wrote this paragraph for herself, knowing she’d have to throw it out of the final text: “I started… to figure out why, why I would want ownership over this kind of idea or this model… the first paragraph… it was to help me picture what this program would look like.”

(Pam, 5/18/93, p. 4)

The revised first paragraph of her final draft of the grant proposal contains only the last two sentences from the original draft:

Currently, immigrant families who make up the majority of residents in [city’s] districts face daunting environmental stressors. They endure the highest crime rates in the city. Immigrants living in crowded apartment buildings make up the most densely populated area of the city, with over 2,000 children living in a six-square-block area characterized by seven-member families occupying studio apartments. The waiting list for the locally available adult English courses and children’s tutoring services are overflowing. In this inner city, multi-ethnic context, barriers to English literacy are many. A program seeking to address these barriers must consider that a new kind of family and community is forming in this urban crucible, and the most effective solutions will come from those who understand this community.” (emphasis added)

She had replaced narrative description with facts. And she had selected only the facts most relevant to the proposed program she was going to introduce. As the writer, she was taking a back seat to the facts rather than presenting an eye-witness account, achieving the appropriate narrative distance required in a grant proposal. Although a self-proclaimed
humanist, Pam understood the role of presenting information objectively in the business environment. In this instance, she understood the differences between two different contexts for writing—or discourse communities—and was able to draw from the one she felt an affinity for in a way that helped her to bridge to writing in the other.

Discussion

Four overlapping social entities, each with distinguishing characteristics in relation to textual production or use have been examined: a non-profit institution, American business as an aggregate of for-profit and not-for-profit institutions, the U.S. Department of Education, and the city government in IRC's locale. A much longer study and fuller report would be necessary to give an exhaustive view of the communicative practices of these entities. Nonetheless, beginning with the focal site of composing, IRC, and radiating out to key overlapping social entities IRC writers exchanged texts with, we can begin to see the ways in which fundamental social values and purposes, decisions about the modes for communication (oral or written), and norms for genres were interwoven to form a gestalt of the communal dimensions of writing practice.

What the study reveals about a particular workplace site of composing or about workplace writing in general is less of interest than the questions raised earlier of whether the data enable us to operationalize the notion of discourse community as a meaningful unit of analysis and whether there is heuristic power in the concept for purposes of teaching writing.

Discourse Community as Unit of Analysis

In a sense I have proposed one overarching explanation of what constitutes a discourse community: it is that social entity within which a set of distinctive writing practices occur and beyond whose borders different writing practices occur. I have looked at IRC, a very small discourse community of 50 employees. The data elucidate the borders of IRC in at least one instance of distinction: the practices associated with the use of internal memos at IRC as distinct from another business entity, IBM. In the case of American business, the data did not afford a comparison to another entity, say Japanese business. But the common practice across subgroups within American business with regard to business letters, including the sub-genre of the letter of request, suggests American business at large can be recognized as a stabilizing social entity in relation to certain textual practices. And in the case of the two governmental entities examined, grant-writing was the focal point for distinguishing differences in communicative practices: The broad features of the activity, even the category of genre was similar, but differing social purposes and values led to different appropriations of communication modes (oral vs. written) and to differing textual norms for the genre. The data also show the ways in which discourse communities can overlap: If there is some common goal, there are at least some cooperative communicative activities, including shared genres and shared norms for those genres.

Factors Influencing Discourse Communities

Key factors influencing the functioning of the discourse community and the key communications features of a discourse community were arrived at both inductively and deductively—from a review of literature on discourse community and from an analysis of patterns emerging in the empirical evidence. The framework of influencing factors and key features made patterns visible and in addition, suggested explanations for those communicative patterns. A review of the data in relation to these three elements will serve to illustrate.

Community values and goals. When Selma, another of my informants in the study, began a memo to her staff, "I apologize for another memo," the community's goal of creating a close-knit work group, like a family, being taken into consideration. That value dictated the preference for face-to-face communication and the precautions taken when a memo was written. Pam's use of hand-written memos, or unconventional typefaces on typed memos after she had been acculturated into IRC, was another gesture toward acknowledging the community's preferred self-image as a family rather than a corporation. She used this discourse community knowledge to aid reception of the memo. When Ursula understood the social relationships being negotiated via the business letter, or when Pam understood the "face validity" function of city grant proposals in accordance with discourse community values and goals, accomplishing the writing task became easier. And when text were viewed according to the relative priority of institutional goals and constituencies addressed (from grant proposal, at the top of the hierarchy, to the internal memo, at the bottom), the logic of various practices became apparent. The potential for financial or political gain affected how much attention a particular writing activity was given at IRC, and by whom within the organization. Only these community values could explain why Ursula would dash off one letter (a rejection letter to someone who'd applied for a job) based on a rather form letter and send days on a letter, equally brief, to a donor who might potentially enable the agency to start an endowment fund through a sizable grant. The community's values influenced what was communicated via what mode, the norms for texts, and writers' roles.
Material conditions. As Gunnarsson (1997) has argued, geographic distance is one of the material factors that can influence communicative activities. We see this exemplified in the infrequent need for the internal memo at JRC because physical proximity and small numbers enabled a great deal of face-to-face communications. The physical nearness or distance of the granting agency (the U.S. Department of Education was 3,000 miles from JRC) also influenced both the interplay of oral and written communication in the grant application process, which in turn influenced the relative importance of the text to the overall community goal and the forms for the text, such as how comprehensive the grant proposal, how rigid and technical the form, etc. And how the writing got done at JRC—the exchange of ideas among writers, the shared editing responsibilities—was made easy by sheer physical proximity and was also stimulated by the "family values" of the community.

Other studies have also pointed to the influence of material conditions on writing activities. Chin (1991) and Yates (1989, 1992) have demonstrated in their research the particular influence of material conditions spatial and geographical arrangements; availability of communications tools such as telephones, filing cabinets, telegraph relay stations, etc.) on communication processes and textual norms for the communities they were studying (a journalism school and American railroad companies).

Individuals' communicative goals and values. The data reveal the strong sense that Ursula had toward "just the facts ma'am," and Pam's bent toward telling all and let the reader be the judge. While neither had enough line or positional influence to alter the communicative practices of the community during the year of this study, Bazerman's study (1988) of the influence of two scientists' individual predilections and histories on the genre of the scientific report is testament to the potential of an individual's influence on the community. Others (Bruffee, 1984; Pratt, 1991) also provide evidence of the creation of "abnormal discourses" within writing communities which disrupt or alter community writing practices.

Communicative Activities

The key factors just described exert their influence on three distinguishing aspects of communicative activity in a discourse community: the choice of communications modes, norms for genres, and roles and tasks for writers.

Choice of communications modes. Because the act of writing is foregrounded in the notion of discourse community, it is easy to neglect the interplay of oral and written communicative activities. Genre studies also foreground text, at the exclusion of other communicative processes that support, extend, or define textual acts. But the only writing that occurred during the length of this study apart from any accompanying oral communication was routine communications via form letters. Oral communications to the recipient(s) of texts—either before or after the text was sent or both—and oral communication to support the writing process was evident in all other instances of text production. As Barbara, the communications consultant, remarked about letters of request, "You wouldn't even write the letter without having a phone conversation or some kind of personal conversation first to tell you whether you can . . . expect a yes" (Barbara, 9/10/94 field notes). Even the decision to put something in writing or to use oral communications (phone or face-to-face conversation) was an important dynamic in the functioning of the discourse community.

Norms for texts. Since genres are the agents of social action (Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1993; Miller, 1984), discourse community goals and values were manifested in the genres of the discourse community. Looking at a single genre—the grant proposal—in two different discourse communities demonstrated that genres are fluid and flexible: Particulars of the genre, such as purpose, structure, or linguistic features could vary depending on the genre's role in the overall communicative processes of the discourse community. Or, in the case of the internal memo at JRC, there was no standardized format and the less informal the look of it and the language, the more acceptance the text would gain within the community. Texts also served symbolic functions within and across discourse communities, as in the case of the press release, or the letter of request, or even the normal business letter. Looking at the larger social milieu of the discourse community had explanatory power in relation to the formal features of genres produced and their uses.

Writer's roles and tasks. As Ursula's struggles to write letters of request indicate, the writer's understandings and knowledge had to encompass a network of social relationships and institutional goals before the specific choice of words and persuasive strategies to address a given rhetorical situation could be arrived at successfully. Complex social relations meant that the thesaurus and dictionary were not sufficient tools for getting the letter written; rather, the writer needed to have face-to-face or phone conversations with individuals in addition to composing texts. The writer who hid in her cubicle, isolated from her audience, was not successful within the discourse community at JRC. If the text was for an external audience, as in the case of the grant proposal, the norms for texts of the recipient discourse community had to be taken into consideration as well. For example, the federal grant proposal required extensive research on the writer's part, whereas the city grant proposal could involve little if any research. And the relative importance of a text to the community's
goals (a form letter versus a request to an important donor) dictated who within the organization would write the letter and the amount of time devoted to the task. A writer's relative status in the organization was in proportion to the level of importance of the text to the organization's overall goals. In the case of JRC, the highest status was given to those who wrote grant proposals.

Unit of Analysis Reconsidered

Figure 1 is an imperfect attempt at a visual representation of the messy, interconnected relations between influencing factors and features of discourse communities as discussed above. This representation suggests the following as a working definition of discourse community: A discourse community is a dynamic social entity within which a set of distinctive, yet changeable, writing practices occur in relation to other modes of communication as a result of the community's shared values and goals, the material conditions for text production, and the influence of individual community members' idiosyncratic purposes and skills as writers.

The data suggest one further observation: The size of the community of less importance than the fact that there are distinguishing features. Discourse community in this case could be a single institution or an aggregate of institutions, as long as each was organized around a distinctive set of writing practices. Likewise, the work on social aspects of writing in the academic disciplines has demonstrated (Bazerman, 1988; Fahnestock & Secor, 1991; McCarthy, 1987; McCarthy & Fishman, 1991), academic disciplines, though not necessarily organized in the sense of buildings, bylaws, and membership rosters, have institutionalized writing practices in many of the same ways as the institutions described in this study. Our further evidence is matters of definition: Communities of practice, as defined by Lave and Wenger (1991), share many properties in common with discourse communities as described in this study, but their focus is not exclusively on writing activities. Genres are the critical product of a discourse community, whereas assisting in navigation or childbirth (two communities of practice Lave and Wenger cite) yield different products. Nor is discourse community synonymous with culture, but rather, it describes one particular patterned activity in a given culture.

The value of one conceptual frame or unit of analysis compared to another is a different consideration, separate from matters of definition. There are many overlaps in discussions of post-modern genre theory (Bazerman, 1994; Berkenkotter & Huckin, 1995; Cohen, 1987; Devitt, 1993; Himley, 1985; Miller, 1984) and the conception of discourse community discussed here. Berkenkotter and Huckin (1993) say, "Genres are the intellectual scaffolds on which community-based knowledge is constructed." (p. 501). The data in this study confirm their claim. Comparing the differences in the genre features of the federal request for proposal (RFP) or the city RFP and the grant proposals written in response to those RFPs could reveal differences in community practices to some extent. But genre features in themselves cannot suggest the full range of oral and written communication that takes place around a given rhetorical situation, nor can an examination of texts in themselves reveal specifically what writers are doing as they write those texts. And as Prior's work (1991, 1994, 1995) demonstrates, interactionist studies and theories of the rhetorical nature of communications also provide another important perspective on text production in terms of specific textual negotiations in the rhetorical present. The production of written discourse can entail a great deal of negotiation between individual readers and writers, and seemingly static forms such as the dissertation proposal (Prior, 1991) are in fact dynamic in the hands of individual writers and their audiences. Given the tension between stabilizing and dynamic social relations influencing discourse community norms, it seems appropriate to consider discourse communities as stable-for-the-moment.

The anti-foundationalist concern (Cooper, 1989; Kent, 1991; Prior, 1991) with the notion of discourse community—that looking for rules or patterns of communication can lead to an ossification of texts or discourse communities and a minimizing of the heteroglossic, individual, and idiosyncratic aspects of written communication—should also be taken seriously. The ethnographer must look for anomalies, outliers, complexity, and resistances to norming, as was noted in the instances here of Umbila and Pam wrestling with discontinuities in the discourse norms of different discourse communities. But were writing not patterned and ordered to some degree, as Bakhtin (1986) has pointed out, there would be little possibility for understanding between speaker and listener, or writer and reader.

In sum, the data suggest that looking at multiple dimensions of writing from the perspective of community practices allows us to see dynamics we might otherwise miss: 1) the influence of values and ideology on modes of communication, norms for genres, and writers' roles and tasks, 2) the relationship between oral and written communication at a particular site for composing and how those relations shape the written discourse, 3) the symbolic functions of texts—apart from any imparting of information—in negotiating social relationships, and 4) the ways in which differing values for written text—even for the same genres, such as the grant proposal—may vary or clash across discourse communities.

This study suggests the possibilities of another framework, and the requisite methodologies of ethnography to examine that framework, to
add to other theoretical frameworks for studying social context. Discourse community, as I see it, occupies a middle ground in the conceptual space suggested by social context. Its view is broader than individual acts of composing or dialogical writer-reader relations and yet is specific enough to allow us to distinguish among different and overlapping communal aspects of writing. Discourse communities also act as key mediators of public (i.e., social) writing activities.

Discourse Community as Heuristic in Teaching Writing

The nagging question at the conclusion of this study is, how do we help those students who, as Bartholomae (1985) put it, when they sit down to write a paper, have to “invent the university...to learn to speak our language...to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define the discourse of our community?” (p.134). Does the notion of discourse community as operationalized here have heuristic power for writers? It is the nagging question of border crossings, from one discourse community to another. As Bartholomae reported in his reading of freshman entrance essays, it takes more than a high school education to understand the complexities of the genre of the academic essay and its role in higher education. And as researchers have demonstrated, there are important distinctions even on one academic discipline to another (Filbow, 1991; McCarthy, 1987).

Students are going to be confronted in school and beyond with border crossings from one discourse community to another.

The pessimistic view is that we can’t help students to understand more than the discourse community they are currently in, given the situated nature of the activity. According to this view, each writing community is idiosyncratic and dynamic that there could be no possible core curriculum in first-year composition courses that would serve students for the duration of their academic or professional careers (Petraglia, 1995) and, furthermore, some argue that the standards of correct writing that we have codified in our rhetorics and readers for freshman composition are not practiced in upper-division contexts for writing or in workplace writing (e.g., Haswell, 1991). Teachers might as well pack up their books and quit teaching if they hope to prepare students for future writing situations they will encounter.

But there is an optimistic view. Transfer of learning is aided when there is meta-cognitive awareness of overarching principles or schemata which can be applied in solving new problems (Flower, 1989; Gick & Holyak, 1987; Perkins & Salomon, 1989a; Perkins & Salomon, 1989b). I argue that the notion of discourse community can be a useful heuristic to guide students, along with other heuristics such as rhetorical analysis and genre analysis, in order to solve problems when confronted with new writing tasks. For example, positing the notion of discourse community as I have operationalized it here leads to a series of questions that can be asked of a text in order to understand its community function:

1. What other communications accompany this text—before or after it is written? How do these communications shape the text?
2. What is communicated by the fact that the mode of communication is written rather than oral discourse in this rhetorical situation? What purpose and meaning does that give to the written communication?
3. What is said by what is left out of the written text?
4. What is the value placed on the text by the communities using it, and given those values, what social role does the writer play in the community?
5. How do the goals and values of the discourse community inform the norms for genres, and the rhetorical strategies employed in those genres?

This heuristic could facilitate a deeper understanding of the form, the rhetorical features, and content requirements of an academic essay. If teachers in boundary-spanning classes such as “Writing in the Professions” or “Technical Writing,” or discipline-specific writing courses were to develop, with their students, comparative frames of one discourse community in relation to another, these frames could facilitate the student’s own border crossings.

Developing such heuristics does not deny the difference between “talking about” a community’s practice and “talking within” that community (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 109). The learning of two newcomers to JRC, Ursula and Pam, was situated in practice, in being “legitimate” participants in that community of writers (Lave & Wenger, p. 27). Their immersion in a web of communicative practices led to effective writing. And as Hill and Resnick (1995) point out, even school-to-work apprenticeships for writers can not fully replicate the experience of being within a community other than the real ones within which they reside, including the academic community, disciplinary communities, and the community of English composition. But if students add the concept of discourse community to the useful tools they learn to use for analyzing new writing situations—including the community norms of the course in which they learn the concept—their learning will extend beyond the semester’s end.

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RTE Web Site Feature

The RTE World Wide Web site offers Hot Links pages with detailed information about镶考 potentially useful resources. These include: Hot Links I: Awards, Funding, and Jobs; Hot Links II: Resources; and Hot Links III: Societal Impact. These pages are updated regularly to provide the latest information on opportunities and developments in the field.

1. Assessment Corporations: These sites provide information on various standardized tests often required for admission to graduate programs.
2. Awards: Here you'll find a comprehensive list of awards presented annually for excellence in research and publication and how to submit nominations for them.
3. Endowments, Foundations, and Grants: Researchers who seek financial support for their work will find an abundance of web sites that provide information on how to apply for external funding.
4. Financial Aid: This page provides a variety of websites for students who are looking for financial support for their education.
5. Job Market: If you're looking for a teaching position, here you'll find links to the online job listings of the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Chronicle of Higher Education, and many other national educational associations and publications.

Hot Links III is one of many features of the RTE web site. We encourage you to visit and give us your feedback and suggestions for additional features and links.

PS. M.W.S.
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