Discourse Community

Definition

In some ways, the expression discourse community means exactly what it sounds like: it's a group of people, members of a community, who share a common interest and who use the same language, or discourse, as they talk and write about that interest. In college settings, we think of discourse communities as connected to disciplinary interests: because botanists belong to their own discourse community, for instance, they write and sound very different from scholars in sociology and from researchers in mechanical engineering. But we can imagine other kinds of discourse communities as well, for example a discourse community of soccer fans or one of scrapbooking enthusiasts. In the discourse community of writing studies, though, we also think in terms of the writing produced within a given discourse community, especially through genres associated with and defining those discourse communities; we thus would be very surprised to find lab reports in the discourse community of philosophers.

Significance

When we write, it's useful to think in terms of the discourse community we are participating in and whose members we are addressing: what do they assume, what kinds of questions do they ask, and what counts as evidence? Likewise, it's helpful to think in terms of the genres we encounter in a given discourse community and the ways we can compose within them.

Resources

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