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The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing

Joseph Harris

If you stand, today, in Between Towns Road, you can see either way; west to the spires and towers of the cathedral and colleges; east to the yards and sheds of the motor works. You see different worlds, but there is no frontier between them; there is only the movement and traffic of a single city.

Raymond Williams
Second Generation (9)

In *The Country and the City*, Raymond Williams writes of how, after a boyhood in a Welsh village, he came to the city, to Cambridge, only then to hear “from townsmen, academics, an influential version of what country life, country literature, really meant: a prepared and persuasive cultural history” (6). This odd double movement, this irony, in which one only begins to understand the place one has come from through the act of leaving it, proved to be one of the shaping forces of Williams’s career—so that, some 35 years after having first gone down to Cambridge, he was still to ask himself: “Where do I stand . . . in another country or in this valuing city?” (6)

A similar irony, I think, describes my own relations to the university. I was raised in a working-class home in Philadelphia, but it was only when I went away to college that I heard the term *working class* used or began to think of myself as part of it. Of course by then I no longer was quite part of it, or at least no longer wholly or simply part of it, but I had also been at college long enough to realize that my relations to it were similarly ambiguous—that here too was a community whose values and interests I could in part share but to some degree would always feel separate from.

This sense of difference, of overlap, of tense plurality, of being at once part of several communities and yet never wholly a member of one, has accompanied nearly all the work and study I have done at the university. So when, in the past few years, a number of teachers and theorists of writing began to talk about the idea of *community* as somehow central to our work, I was drawn to what was said. Since my aim here is to argue for a more critical look at a

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term that, as Williams has pointed out, “seems never to be used unfavourably” (*Keywords* 66), I want to begin by stating my admiration for the theorists—in particular, David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell—whose work I will discuss. They have helped us, I think, to ask some needed questions about writing and how we might go about teaching it.¹

Perhaps the most important work of these theorists has centered on the demystifying of the concept of *intention*. That is, rather than viewing the intentions of a writer as private and ineffable, wholly individual, they have helped us to see that it is only through being part of some ongoing discourse that we can, as individual writers, have things like points to make and purposes to achieve. As Bartholomae argues: “It is the discourse with its projects and agendas that determines what writers can and will do” (139). We write not as isolated individuals but as members of communities whose beliefs, concerns, and practices both instigate and constrain, at least in part, the sorts of things we can say. Our aims and intentions in writing are thus not merely personal, idiosyncratic, but reflective of the communities to which we belong.

But while this concern with the power of social forces in writing is much needed in a field that has long focused narrowly on the composing processes of individual writers, some problems in how we have imagined those forces are now becoming clear. First, recent theories have tended to invoke the idea of community in ways at once sweeping and vague: positing discursive utopias that direct and determine the writings of their members, yet failing to state the operating rules or boundaries of these communities. One result of this has been a view of “normal discourse” in the university that is oddly lacking in conflict or change. Recent social views of writing have also often presented university discourse as almost wholly foreign to many of our students, raising questions not only about their chances of ever learning to use such an alien tongue, but of why they should want to do so in the first place. And, finally, such views have tended to polarize our talk about writing: One seems asked to defend either the power of the discourse community or the imagination of the individual writer.

Williams and the Problem of Community

In trying to work towards a more useful sense of *community*, I will take both my method and theme from Raymond Williams in his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*. Williams’s approach in this vocabulary reverses that of the dictionary-writer. For rather than trying to define and fix the meanings of the words he discusses, to clear up the many ambiguities involved with them, Williams instead attempts to sketch “a history and complexity of meanings” (15), to show how and why the meanings of certain words—*art*, *criticism*, *culture*, *history*, *literature*, and the like—are still being contested. Certainly *community*, at once so vague and suggestive, is such a word too, and I will begin, then, with what Williams has to say about it:

Community can be the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (*state, nation, society*, etc.) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term. (66)

There seem to me two warnings here. The first is that, since it has no "positive opposing" term, *community* can soon become an empty and sentimental word. And it is easy enough to point to such uses in the study of writing, particularly in the many recent calls to transform the classroom into "a community of interested readers," to recast academic disciplines as "communities of knowledgeable peers," or to translate standards of correctness into "the expectations of the academic community." In such cases, *community* tends to mean little more than a nicer, friendlier, fuzzier version of what came before.

But I think Williams is also hinting at the extraordinary rhetorical power one can gain through speaking of community. It is a concept both seductive and powerful, one that offers us a view of shared purpose and effort and that also makes a claim on us that is hard to resist. For like the pronoun *we*, *community* can be used in such a way that it invokes what it seems merely to describe. The writer says to his reader: "We are part of a certain community; they are not"—and, if the reader accepts, the statement is true. And, usually, the gambit of community, once offered, is almost impossible to decline—since what is invoked is a community of those in power, of those who know the accepted ways of writing and interpreting texts. Look, for instance, at how David Bartholomae begins his remarkable essay on "Inventing the University":

Every 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. The student has to learn to *speak our language, to speak as we do*, to try on the peculiar ways of knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing that define *the discourse of our community*. (134, my emphases)

Note here how the view of discourse at the university shifts subtly from the dynamic to the fixed—from something that a writer must continually reinvent to something that has already been invented, a language that "we" have access to but that many of our students do not. The university becomes "our community," its various and competing discourses become "our language," and the possibility of a kind of discursive free-for-all is quickly rephrased in more familiar terms of us and them, insiders and outsiders.

This tension runs throughout Bartholomae's essay. On one hand, the university is pictured as the site of many discourses, and successful writers are seen as those who are able to work both within and against them, who can find a place for themselves on the margins or borders of a number of dis-

courses. On the other, the university is also seen as a cluster of separate communities, disciplines, in which writers must locate themselves through taking on "the commonplaces, set phrases, rituals and gestures, habits of mind, tricks of persuasion, obligatory conclusions and necessary connections that determine 'what might be said'" (146). Learning to write, then, gets defined both as the forming of an aggressive and critical stance towards a number of discourses, and as a more simple entry into the discourse of a single community.

Community thus becomes for Bartholomae a kind of stabilizing term, used to give a sense of shared purpose and effort to our dealings with the various discourses that make up the university. The question, though, of just who this "we" is that speaks "our language" is never resolved.² And so while Bartholomae often refers to the "various branches" of the university, he ends up claiming to speak only of "university discourse in its most generalized form" (147). Similarly, most of the "communities" to which other current theorists refer exist at a vague remove from actual experience: The University, The Profession, The Discipline, The Academic Discourse Community. They are all quite literally utopias—nowheres, meta-communities—tied to no particular time or place, and thus oddly free of many of the tensions, discontinuities, and conflicts in the sorts of talk and writing that go on everyday in the classrooms and departments of an actual university. For all the scrutiny it has drawn, the idea of community thus still remains little more than a notion—hypothetical and suggestive, powerful yet ill-defined.³

Part of this vagueness stems from the ways that the notion of "discourse community" has come into the study of writing—drawing on one hand from the literary-philosophical idea of "interpretive community," and on the other from the sociolinguistic concept of "speech community," but without fully taking into account the differences between the two. "Interpretive community," as used by Stanley Fish and others, is a term in a theoretical debate; it refers not so much to specific physical groupings of people as to a kind of loose dispersed network of individuals who share certain habits of mind. "Speech community," however, is usually meant to describe an actual group of speakers living in a particular place and time.⁴ Thus while "interpretive community" can usually be taken to describe something like a world-view, discipline, or profession, "speech community" is generally used to refer more specifically to groupings like neighborhoods, settlements, or classrooms.

What "discourse community" means is far less clear. In the work of some theorists, the sense of community as an active lived experience seems to drop out almost altogether, to be replaced by a shadowy network of citations and references. Linda Brodkey, for instance, argues that:

To the extent that the academic community is a community, it is a literate community, manifested not so much at conferences as in bibliographies and libraries, a community whose members know one another better as writers than speakers. (12)

And James Porter takes this notion a step further, identifying “discourse community” with the *intertextuality* of Foucault—an argument that parallels in interesting ways E. D. Hirsch’s claim, in *Cultural Literacy*, that a literate community can be defined through the clusters of allusions and references that its members share. In such views, *community* becomes little more than a metaphor, a shorthand label for a hermetic weave of texts and citations.

Most theorists who use the term, however, seem to want to keep something of the tangible and specific reference of “speech community”—to suggest, that is, that there really are “academic discourse communities” out there somewhere, real groupings of writers and readers, that we can help “initiate” our students into. But since these communities are not of speakers, but of writers and readers who are dispersed in time and space, and who rarely, if ever, meet one another in person, they invariably take on something of the ghostly and pervasive quality of “interpretive communities” as well.

There have been some recent attempts to solve this problem. John Swales, for instance, has defined “discourse community” so that the common space shared by its members is replaced by a discursive “forum,” and their one-to-one interaction is reduced to a system “providing information and feedback.” A forum is not a community, though, so Swales also stipulates that there must be some common “goal” towards which the group is working (2-3). A similar stress on a shared or collaborative project runs through most other attempts to define “discourse community.”⁵ Thus while *community* loses its rooting in a particular place, it gains a new sense of direction and movement. Abstracted as they are from almost all other kinds of social and material relations, only an affinity of beliefs and purposes, consensus, is left to hold such communities together. The sort of group invoked is a free and voluntary gathering of individuals with shared goals and interests—of persons who have not so much been forced together as have chosen to associate with one another. So while the members of an “academic discourse community” may not meet each other very often, they are presumed to think much like one another (and thus also much *unlike* many of the people they deal with everyday: students, neighbors, co-workers in other disciplines, and so on). In the place of physical nearness we are given like-mindedness. We fall back, that is, on precisely the sort of “warmly persuasive” and sentimental view of community that Williams warns against.

Insiders and Outsiders

One result of this has been, in recent work on the teaching of writing, the pitting of a “common” discourse against a more specialized or “privileged” one. For instance, Bartholomae argues that:

The movement towards a more specialized discourse begins . . . both when a student can define a position of privilege, a position that sets him

against a "common" discourse, and when he or she can work self-consciously, critically, against not only the "common" code but his or her own. (156)

The troubles of many student writers, Bartholomae suggests, begin with their inability to imagine such a position of privilege, to define their views against some "common" way of talking about their subject. Instead, they simply repeat in their writing "what everybody knows" or what their professor has told them in her lectures. The result, of course, is that they are penalized for "having nothing really to say."

The task of the student is thus imagined as one of crossing the border from one community of discourse to another, of taking on a new sort of language. Again, the power of this metaphor seems to me undeniable. First, it offers us a way of talking about why many of our students fail to think and write as we would like them to *without* having to suggest that they are somehow slow or inept because they do not. Instead, one can argue that the problem is less one of intelligence than socialization, that such students are simply unused to the peculiar demands of academic discourse. Second, such a view reminds us (as Patricia Bizzell has often argued) that one's role as a teacher is not merely to inform but to persuade, that we ask our students to acquire not only certain skills and data, but to try on new forms of thinking and talking about the world as well. The problem is, once having posited two separate communities with strikingly different ways of making sense of the world, it then becomes difficult to explain how or why one moves from one group to the other. If to enter the academic community a student must "learn to speak our language," become accustomed and reconciled to our ways of doing things with words, then how exactly is she to do this?

Bizzell seems to picture the task as one of assimilation, of conversion almost. One sets aside one's former ways to become a member of the new community. As she writes:

Mastery of academic discourse must begin with socialization to the community's ways, in the same way that one enters any cultural group. One must first "go native." ("Foundationalism" 53)

And one result of this socialization, Bizzell argues, may "mean being completely alienated from some other, socially disenfranchised discourses" (43). The convert must be born again.

Bartholomae uses the language of paradox to describe what must be accomplished:

To speak with authority [our students] have to speak not only in another's voice but through another's code; and they not only have to do this, they have to speak in the voice and through the codes of those of us with power and wisdom; and they not only have to do this, they have to do it before they know what they are doing, before they have a project to participate in, and before, at least in the terms of our disciplines, they have anything to say. (156)

And so here, too, the learning of a new discourse seems to rest, at least in part, on a kind of mystical leap of mind. Somehow the student must “invent the university,” appropriate a way of speaking and writing belonging to others.

Writing as Repositioning

The emphasis of Bartholomae’s pedagogy, though, seems to differ in slight but important ways from his theory. In *Facts, Artifacts, and Counterfacts*, a text for a course in basic writing, Bartholomae and Anthony Petrosky describe a class that begins by having students write on what they already think and feel about a certain subject (e.g., adolescence or work), and then tries to get them to redefine that thinking through a seminar-like process of reading and dialogue. The course thus appears to build on the overlap between the students’ “common” discourses and the “academic” ones of their teachers, as they are asked to work “within and against” both their own languages and those of the texts they are reading (8). The move, then, is not simply from one discourse to another but towards a “hesitant and tenuous relationship” to both (41).

Such a pedagogy helps remind us that the borders of most discourses are hazily marked and often travelled, and that the communities they define are thus often indistinct and overlapping. As Williams again has suggested, one does not step cleanly and wholly from one community to another, but is caught instead in an always changing mix of dominant, residual, and emerging discourses (*Marxism* 121-27, see also Nicholas Coles on “Raymond Williams: Writing Across Borders”). Rather than framing our work in terms of helping students move from one community of discourse into another, then, it might prove more useful (and accurate) to view our task as adding to or complicating their uses of language.

I am not proposing such addition as a neutral or value-free pedagogy. Rather, I would expect and hope for a kind of useful dissonance as students are confronted with ways of talking about the world with which they are not yet wholly familiar. What I am arguing against, though, is the notion that our students should necessarily be working towards the mastery of some particular, well-defined sort of discourse. It seems to me that they might better be encouraged towards a kind of polyphony—an awareness of and pleasure in the various competing discourses that make up their own.

To illustrate what such an awareness might involve, let me turn briefly to some student writings. The first comes from a paper on *Hunger of Memory*, in which Richard Rodriguez describes how, as a Spanish-speaking child growing up in California, he was confronted in school by the need to master the “public language” of his English-speaking teachers and classmates. In her response, Sylvia, a young black woman from Philadelphia, explains that her situation is perhaps more complex, since she is aware of having at least two “private lan-

guages”: a Southern-inflected speech which she uses with her parents and older relatives, and the “street talk” which she shares with her friends and neighbors. Sylvia concludes her essay as follows:

My third and last language is one that Rodriguez referred to as “public language.” Like Rodriguez, I too am having trouble accepting and using “public language.” Specifically, I am referring to Standard English which is defined in some English texts as:

“The speaking and writing of cultivated people . . . the variety of spoken and written language which enjoys cultural prestige, and which is the medium of education, journalism, and literature. Competence in its use is necessary for advancement in many occupations.”

Presently, I should say that “public language” is *becoming* my language as I am not yet comfortable in speaking it and even less comfortable in writing it. According to my mother anyone who speaks in “proper English” is “putting on airs.”

In conclusion, I understand the relevance and importance of learning to use “public language,” but, like Rodriguez, I am also afraid of losing my “private identity”—that part of me that my parents, my relatives, and my friends know and understand. However, on the other hand, within me, there is an intense desire to grow and become a part of the “public world”—a world that exists outside of the secure and private world of my parents, relatives, and friends. If I want to belong, I must learn the “public language” too.

The second passage is written by Ron, a white factory worker in central Pennsylvania, and a part-time student. It closes an end-of-the-term reflection on his work in the writing course he was taking.

As I look back over my writings for this course I see a growing acceptance of the freedom to write as I please, which is allowing me to almost enjoy writing (I can't believe it). So I tried this approach in another class I am taking. In that class we need to write summations of articles each week. The first paper that I handed in, where I used more feeling in my writing, came back with a (✓-) and the comment, “Stick to the material.” My view is, if they open the pen I will run as far as I can, but I won't break out because I have this bad habit, it's called eating.

What I admire in both passages is the writer's unwillingness to reduce his or her options to a simple either/or choice. Sylvia freely admits her desire to learn the language of the public world. Her “I understand . . . but” suggests, however, that she is not willing to loosen completely her ties to family and neighborhood in order to do so. And Ron is willing to run with the more free style of writing he has discovered, “if they open the pen.” Both seem aware, that is, of being implicated in not one but a number of discourses, a number of communities, whose beliefs and practices conflict as well as align. And it is the tension between those discourses—none repudiated or chosen wholly—that gives their texts such interest.

There has been much debate in recent years over whether we need, above

all, to respect our students' "right to their own language," or to teach them the ways and forms of "academic discourse." Both sides of this argument, in the end, rest their cases on the same suspect generalization: that we and our students belong to different and fairly distinct communities of discourse, that we have "our" "academic" discourse and they have "their own" "common" (!) ones. The choice is one between opposing fictions. The "languages" that our students bring to us cannot but have been shaped, at least in part, by their experiences in school, and thus must, in some ways, already be "academic." Similarly, our teaching will and should always be affected by a host of beliefs and values that we hold regardless of our roles as academics. What we see in the classroom, then, are not two coherent and competing discourses but many overlapping and conflicting ones. Our students are no more wholly "outside" the discourse of the university than we are wholly "within" it. We are all at once both insiders and outsiders. The fear (or hope) of either camp that our students will be "converted" from "their" language to "ours" is both overstated and misleading. The task facing our students, as Min-zhan Lu has argued, is not to leave one community in order to enter another, but to *reposition* themselves in relation to several continuous and conflicting discourses. Similarly, our goals as teachers need not be to initiate our students into the values and practices of some new community, but to offer them the chance to reflect critically on those discourses—of home, school, work, the media, and the like—to which they already belong.

Community without Consensus

"Alongside each utterance . . . off-stage voices can be heard," writes Barthes (21). We do not write simply as individuals, but we do not write simply as members of a community either. The point is, to borrow a turn of argument from Stanley Fish, that one does not *first* decide to act as a member of one community rather than some other, and *then* attempt to conform to its (rather than some other's) set of beliefs and practices. Rather, one is always *simultaneously* a part of several discourses, several communities, is always already committed to a number of conflicting beliefs and practices.⁶ As Mary Louise Pratt has pointed out: "People and groups are constituted not by single unified belief systems, but by competing self-contradictory ones" (228). One does not necessarily stop being a feminist, for instance, in order to write literary criticism (although one discourse may try to repress or usurp the other). And, as the example of Williams shows, one does not necessarily give up the loyalties of a working-class youth in order to become a university student (although some strain will no doubt be felt).

In *The Country and the City*, Williams notes an "escalator effect" in which each new generation of English writers points to a lost age of harmony and organic community that thrived just before their own, only of course to have

the era in which they were living similarly romanticized by the writers who come after them (9-12). Rather than doing much the same, romanticizing academic discourse as occurring in a kind of single cohesive community, I would urge, instead, that we think of it as taking place in something more like a city. That is, instead of presenting academic discourse as coherent and well-defined, we might be better off viewing it as polyglot, as a sort of space in which competing beliefs and practices intersect with and confront one another. One does not need consensus to have community. Matters of accident, necessity, and convenience hold groups together as well. Social theories of reading and writing have helped to deconstruct the myth of the autonomous essential self. There seems little reason now to grant a similar sort of organic unity to the idea of community.

The metaphor of the city would also allow us to view a certain amount of change and struggle within a community not as threats to its coherence but as normal activity. The members of many classrooms and academic departments, not to mention disciplines, often seem to share few enough beliefs or practices with one another. Yet these communities exert a very real influence on the discourses of their members. We need to find a way to talk about their workings without first assuming a consensus that may not be there. As Bizzell has recently come to argue:

Healthy discourse communities, like healthy human beings, are also masses of contradictions. . . . We should accustom ourselves to dealing with contradictions, instead of seeking a theory that appears to abrogate them. ("What" 18-19)

I would urge an even more specific and material view of community: one that, like a city, allows for both consensus and conflict, and that holds room for ourselves, our disciplinary colleagues, our university coworkers, *and* our students. In short, I think we need to look more closely at the discourses of communities that are more than communities of discourse alone. While I don't mean to discount the effects of belonging to a discipline, I think that we dangerously abstract and idealize the workings of "academic discourse" by taking the kinds of rarified talk and writing that go on at conferences and in journals as the norm, and viewing many of the other sorts of talk and writing that occur at the university as deviations from or approximations of that standard. It may prove more useful to center our study, instead, on the everyday struggles and mishaps of the talk in our classrooms and departments, with their mixings of sometimes conflicting and sometimes conjoining beliefs and purposes.

Indeed, I would suggest that we reserve our uses of *community* to describe the workings of such specific and local groups. We have other words—*discourse*, *language*, *voice*, *ideology*, *hegemony*—to chart the perhaps less immediate (though still powerful) effects of broader social forces on our talk and writing. None of them is, surely, without its own echoes of meaning, both suggestive

and troublesome. But none, I believe, carries with it the sense of like-mindedness and warmth that make community at once such an appealing *and* limiting concept. As teachers and theorists of writing, we need a vocabulary that will allow us to talk about certain forces as social rather than communal, as involving power but not always consent. Such talk could give us a fuller picture of the lived experience of teaching, learning, and writing in a university today.

Notes

1. This essay began as part of a 1988 CCCC panel on "Raymond Williams and the Teaching of Composition." My thanks go to my colleagues on that panel, Nicholas Coles and Minzhan Lu, for their help in conceiving and carrying through this project, as well as to David Bartholomae and Patricia Bizzell for their useful readings of many versions of this text.

2. One might argue that there never really is a "we" for whom the language of the university (or a particular discipline) is fully invented and accessible. Greg Myers, for instance, has shown how two biologists—presumably well-trained scholars long initiated into the practices of their discipline—had to reshape their writings extensively to make them fit in with "what might be said" in the journals of their own field. Like our students, we too must re-invent the university whenever we sit down to write.

3. A growing number of theorists have begun to call this vagueness of community into question. See, for instance: Bazerman on "Some Difficulties in Characterizing Social Phenomena in Writing," Bizzell on "What is a Discourse Community?" Herzberg on "The Politics of Discourse Communities," and Swales on "Approaching the Concept of Discourse Community."

4. See, for instance, Dell Hymes in *Foundations in Sociolinguistics*: "For our purposes it appears most useful to reserve the notion of community for a local unit, characterized for its members by common locality and primary interaction, and to admit exceptions cautiously" (51).

5. See, for instance, Bizzell on the need for "emphasizing the crucial function of a collective project in unifying the group" ("What" 1), and Bruffee on the notion that "to learn is to work collaboratively . . . among a community of knowledgeable peers" (646).

6. Bruce Robbins makes much the same case in "Professionalism and Politics: Toward Productively Divided Loyalties," as does John Schilb in "When Bricolage Becomes Theory: The Hazards of Ignoring Ideology." Fish too seems recently to be moving towards this position, arguing that an interpretive community is an "engine of change" fueled by the interaction and conflict of the various beliefs and practices that make it up. As he puts it: "Beliefs are not all held at the same level or operative at the same time. Beliefs, if I may use a metaphor, are nested, and on occasion they may affect and even alter one another and so the entire system or network they comprise" ("Change" 429).

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Call for CCCC Committee Members

CCCC plans to constitute a committee on the Preparation of College Teachers of Writing. If you are interested in being considered for service on this committee, please write to Andrea A. Lunsford, CCCC Chair, NCTE, 1111 Kenyon Rd., Urbana, IL 61801.