

**Reading Digital Communities, Publics, and Counterpublics:
Sociorhetorical Heuristics in the Public Writing Classroom**

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Erika Lindemann (2001) argues that rhetoric is both “a field of humane study and a pragmatic art; that is, we can read about it as well as practice it” (40). Discourse communities, publics, and counterpublics, each a construct of social rhetoric, certainly operate as this rhetorical duality wherein the concepts can be a group of people or a way of defining and reading said group. Our students have membership in a variety of socially and culturally defined groups, yet our students can benefit from using these socio-rhetorical concepts to define and interpret cultural, social or political groups unfamiliar to them, to read the goals and ideology of said groups, and to identify how a group’s values and language practices change upon entry into the public sphere.

Students may struggle to define social groups and their rhetorical practices; technology, specifically, the remediation and non-linearity of texts and messages distributed or redistributed through digital communication and multimedia, adds another layer of complexity to student interpretation. This article will outline the applicability of the concept of discourse community as a heuristic for analyzing argument and public sphere rhetoric in technologically-mediated texts and dialogues. However, the concept of discourse communities cannot fully answer the *how* and *why* of both internal change and publicity over time (Deans 2010); thus, this article will close by suggesting several areas of public sphere theory (based upon a theory of multiple publics often labeled *counterpublics*) that can be borrowed to augment reading strategies for students defining the plural communities of the public sphere.

Reading strategies based upon these sociorhetorical member groups can lead to students’ understanding of and eventually membership in a discourse community or public, which allows the student to write as a member of the group, not an outsider, and this budding

membership produces new potentialities for writing assignments. This facet of the reading-to-writing translation is particularly important for public writing or Writing-in-Communities courses—courses that typically require an experiential, public, service-learning, or intern writing role for non-academic audiences.

This article will first discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of discourse community as a reading heuristic to prepare students to write. Next, the article will outline how the reading and interpretation process is compounded by the non-linear spatiality of digital and multimedia texts. Finally, the article will suggest several areas of public or counterpublic rhetorical theory that supplement the use of discourse community as a reading heuristic. As I have developed my own public writing course over several semesters, I have begun using the areas of private/public, circulation, and public issue vs. community to interrogate and supplement the use of discourse community in my own public writing courses. While my concerns apply to all writing, new media, or media courses, I hope to advance public writing heuristics and pedagogical conversation in particular.

Discourse Communities in Composition Studies

The history and use of discourse communities ranges widely, and the application of the concept continues to evolve in composition studies as new communities and forms of technological communities arise. Early in the 1980s, the term discourse community grew out of Martin Nystrand's (1982) concept of speech community. Members of speech and discourse communities will "recognize the conditions under which other members of the community believe it is appropriate to use" discourse conventions (Spolsky as cited in Paltridge 2006, 27). Discourse communities, however, are based around an activity, such as a community or occupational organization or association. The community has distinct goals,

values, beliefs, and social norms that are extant in the genres and other forms of communication that designate community membership.

In his often-cited *Genre Analysis: English in Academic and Research Settings*, John Swales (1990) argues that speech communities' major function is socialization and solidarity, whereas in a discourse community people are united and create genres to reach the group's goals. Swales states that

[i]n a socio-rhetorical discourse community, the primary determinants of linguistic behavior are functional, since a discourse community consists of a group of people who linkup in order to pursue objectives that are prior to those of socialization and solidarity. (24).

The ability of a discourse community to address socially-constructed identity and goals as well as socio-rhetorical genre use made discourse communities a major feature of composition studies' social turn. James Berlin (1988) frames discourse community as a part of social-epistemic rhetoric, wherein the social-epistemic is "located in a relationship that involves the dialectical interaction of the observer, the discourse community (social group) in which the observer is functioning, and the material conditions of existence" (13). As the concept of discourse community slowly became discussed in mainstream composition research, Patricia Bizzell (1992) defined a discourse community as

a group of people who share certain language-using practices. These practices can be seen as conventionalized in two ways. Stylistic conventions regulate social interactions both within the group and in its dealings with outsiders; to this extent "discourse community" borrows from the sociolinguistic concept of "speech community." Also, canonical knowledge regulates the world views of

group members, how they interpret experience; to this extent “discourse communities” borrows from the literary-critical concept of “interpretive community.” The key term “discourse” suggests a community bound together primarily through its use of language, although bound perhaps by other ties as well. (*Academic Discourses* 222)

Pedro Martin-Martin (2005) argues that Bizzell’s conception, unlike Swales, does not delimit the concept of discourse community to stylistic phenomena; rather, Bizzell’s definition allows for overlapping memberships to create conflict when a subject belongs to various communities (Martin-Martin 42).

Thomas Deans (2010) moves the concept past stylistic concerns, genre, and overlapping community membership when noting that the concept of discourse community helps explain communicational failure and success. Discourse community

emphasize[s] the social nature of writing, [...] help[s] us imagine how individual writing practices are situated within and shaped by their institutional and cultural contexts; [...] and help[s] us explain how and why writers behave—even succeed and fail—in certain situations. (452)

It is exactly this—the success, failure, change, or unintended reception of community, public, or public/counterpublic communication—that is of interest in a course focusing on marginalized communities succeeding, failing, or being altered in the public sphere.

Problematizing Discourse Communities as a Heuristic

The concept of discourse community is not without its problems in both theory and application. Joseph Harris (1989) and Deans (2010) argue that the concept of discourse

community masks potential contradictions in a community, and David Russell (1997) and Deans (2010) report that the concept conceals dynamic interaction, fails to represent individual action and agency, and does not fully explicate “individual or collective changes over time” (Deans 453). Deans summarizes these failures as the failure to identify the *how* and *why* (452) of any activity in the discourse community or activity field. James Porter (1992) asserts of discourse communities a claim equally valid for their use as a reading strategy. Discourse communities can be “an unstable assemblage of faults, fissures, and heterogeneous layers [...]”; yet a discourse community “nevertheless operates with some kind of regularity” (107).

Taken as an aggregate, these critics suggest that a discourse community can be useful in identifying and stabilizing into a set of practices both cultural and communicational activities, but the concept of discourse community may also operate metaphorically or discursively and not represent the full spectrum of ideology, conflict, and change within the community. I suggest this does not bar the concept of discourse community from being useful. Rather, compositionists must be aware of the concept’s limits, and we must make our students aware of these as well.

Discourse Communities and Contact Zones

Despite these limitations, composition pedagogy found discourse communities and their mutual dialogue in “contact zones” useful in composition during the late 1980s and 1990s as composition studies absorbed theories of social construction into writing pedagogy. The idea of a community or contact zone offered instructors and students a heuristic for identifying the operations behind inclusion and exclusion in a particular community or multiple communities, and these concepts allowed for a discussion of how

individuals form (or are formed by) values and take on roles according to expectations and environments.

Instructors of composition taught and continue to teach cultural and rhetorical *contact zones*, zones of cultural mediation where linguistic and literacy scripts come into contact with one another, with one script often positioned as the script of authority (Pratt 1991, 6-7).

Patricia Bizzell (1997) suggests that a contact zone is “defined primarily in terms of historical circumstances, but with elastic boundaries. [...] I submit that the United States is another such contact zone, or more precisely, a congeries of overlapping contact zones” (“Contact Zones” 738).

Students were often asked to write and speak, sometimes agonistically, the values and issues as a member of a discourse community during class. Joseph Harris (1997) documents the backfiring of this agonistic classroom use of “communities” and “contact zones” due to student resistance (119) that created hostility or non-critical silence in other students, the assignment, or the idea of social justice education.

Clearly the concepts of contact zone or discourse community are not to blame for the pedagogical backfire; rather, it is the form of implementation in pedagogy that can be useful, or not, in the classroom. Christopher Schroeder (2002) posits that contact zones can include the negotiation of discursive representations (198-99), which means that Schroeder’s definition lends itself to analysis of multiple texts or dynamic interaction amongst community members. This definition delivers a broader view of how to use discourse communities in the writing classroom. A heuristic usage allows one to avoid direct ideological confrontation with or between students, but still utilizes the concept of discourse communities to scaffold students’ evaluation of texts, intertextuality, and discursive representations.

In *Writing as a Social Process*, Bruce McComiskey (2000) similarly discusses how his writing assignments and workshops focus on three levels—the linguistic, the rhetorical, and the discursive. McComiskey has students analyze texts for appropriateness and effectiveness, including his own students' letters of complaint written from their own university student community to other university communities, such as janitorial and administrative staff, who have different assumptions about the relationship between students and university services. McComiskey suggests that when his students choose an audience, they typically are successful on the linguistic and rhetorical levels, but they have trouble understanding the discursive values of the non-student audience to whom they write (14-17). Thus, the discursive values of a discourse community are a major obstacle to a student's effective entry into a community, understanding a community, or persuading a community different than one's own.

New Challenges: Digital Reading, Context, and Field Dependency

In the following section, I will outline in detail how discourse communities can function as heuristics for evaluating interaction and understanding difference between communities, reading audiences, and the technologies used by either sender or receiver. Before doing so, I would like to situate discourse community activity inside of technological communication. When a community uses technology to communicate its message, the technologically-distributed texts offer significant new semiotic layers that students must confront. These layers challenge students' reading and interpretation, and students must assess the *how* and *why* of technology use—two questions that, according to Deans, the concept of discourse community may struggle to resolve even without technological layers. This section will present some challenges of reading technology and multimedia.

Technology complicates an already complicated reading and interpretation process. One complication is what Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin (1999) refer to as “remediation,” wherein every message is simply a refraction of a previous message. In this poststructural view, no initial message exists. Technology certainly presents a reader with this problem, whether synthesizing multiple media resources into a compact visual/verbal/auditory message, or turning a linguistic message into a multimedia message, making a precise objective or original intention impossible to identify (and theoretically implausible as well). As Susan Hilligloss and Sean Williams (2007) suggest of a research paradigm based upon remediation, “A research program that engages digital visual texts as acts of remediation, showing how the visual frames the verbal, which frames the visual in an endless cycle of simulation clearly breaks down the visual/verbal binary” (239). Thus, remediation itself complicates the interpretive process for students assessing the argumentative claims, strategies, and logic of technological texts. Instructors modeling analysis would most likely seek to slow down the interpretive process and assess the verbal and the visual separately, yet as Hilligloss and Williams suggest, this binary may be arbitrary or non-existent, making an instructor’s modeling problematic because of the non-linear reading process implicit in reading multimedia.

Even if a reader could perfectly separate the word and image, differences in reading the semiotics of writing and visuality would complicate both instructor modeling and a student’s reading and interpretive process. Gunther Kress (2003) suggests that speech and writing are measured by a sequential logic of time, but visual argument is defined by space (1-2). The general effect of multimedia on the reading process is to create a non-linear reading process in which students are offered multiple semiotic codes, any of which may become the focus of interpretation. Kress suggests of new media that they

make it easy to use a multiplicity of modes, and in particular the mode of image—still or moving—as well as other modes, such as music and sound effect for instance. They change, through their affordances, the potentials for representational and communicational action by their users. (5)

Again, even if a reader does separate the oral/written text (time-based literacy) from the visual (space-based literacy), visual text itself offers interpretive problems. J. Anthony Blair (2004) posits that “some visual propositions are intended as claims and others as reasons for those claims” (348). Furthermore,

What distinguishes visual argument from verbal argument, then, are the differences in argument expression facing the arguer, and the hermeneutical differences in of identification and interpretation facing the interlocutor, audience, or critic. These are likely to create formidable practical problems for arguer and audience [...]. (349)

Some media text may offer a clear hierarchy for interpretation, such as linear oral and written text that contains a controlling logic, semiotic code, and argument that clearly places the visual in a supporting role. However, as Jacob Stroupe (2004) points out, the relation between linear written text and visual graphics has been variable throughout the history of illustrated text. Stroup reminds us that a “hybrid literacy of words and images” can support, challenge, or frame the other’s meaning, and they can create a gestalt meaning beyond either word or image. Thus, students may struggle to properly integrate the written with the visual. For example, even with the visual subordinated, students may still misidentify the rhetorical relationship in which the written and visual extend, contradict, or simply support each other to achieve an intended rhetorical effect. Separation of the written and visual doesn’t

guarantee a socially expected recombining and interpretation by the reader. The choices are many and the potential for confusion or non-standard interpretation is great even in simple non-linear texts.

The aforementioned problems are representative of the challenges of reading non-linear texts in general. It stands to reason, then, that multimedia representations of a discourse community cause difficulty in interpretation not only because of the inherent discursivity of discourse communities, their “faults and fissures” (Porter 1992), but through the non-linearity of multimedia as well.

Turning from the text to the role of the reader, technology offers another challenge to the reader. Julia E. Romberger (2007) suggests that technology can also challenge reading and writing practices because of the role that technology initiates. She opines that

when applying the concept of discourse community to an interface, the visual, textual, and even interactive aspects are seen as being informed by assumptions concerning the users’ understandings of the discourse or, for instance, the electronic environment of other software. Because assumptions are made by developers about what users understand, it becomes clear that boundaries are being set that the users must learn to negotiate, assimilate, and perhaps recreate to achieve literacy in a digital environment and to use the environment to fulfill certain composing tasks. (259)

Software, programs, multimedia, and related technologies assume, and one could easily say prescribe, user identities that limit the user or force the user into particular, limiting reading and writing roles. For instance, Joshua Burnett, Sally Chandler, and Jackie Lopez (2007) suggest that technology adds a new dimension to the typical variables of “personality,

ethnicity, and ideology in multicultural classrooms” (320) because when using technology, students must choose a role of either a technologically-savvy “insider” or a technologically-resistant “outsider.” Students must join an initial discourse community based upon their role, which is a response to technology as an object. Once the role has been chosen, the student can construct their “virtual selves to represent their interests, actions, and ideas” (324) on a range of issues, discourses and contexts. However, this membership to “tech-savvy-or-not” discourse communities complicates the reading and interpretation process. This additional membership can complicate the a reading of multimedia; yet a discourse community heuristic could potentially help identify this membership, which is embedded in more traditional cultural memberships (race, gender, class, etc.).

Having discussed the challenges of multimedia reading and the layering of readers’ roles by technology, I’d like to conclude this section by discussing multimedia’s position in field dependent argument. Both Barbara Warnick (2007) and Irv Peckham (2010) discuss a field-dependent, socially-defined model of argument based upon Stephen Toulmin’s *The Uses of Argument*. In field dependent argument, the validity of an argument is based upon context and community standards. Validity is not based upon the argument’s coherence with proper syllogistic forms of thinking because rational, representative arguments are never produced through field-independent mechanisms, whether cognitive or linguistic-logical. Toulmin ascertained that syllogistic mechanisms cannot consistently produce truths when used across a variety of argumentative or discourse fields. Rather, an argument’s validity is only gleaned through its social context.

Irv Peckham argues that the concept of field independent argument is based upon claims of logic’s congruence with cognitive operations producing persuasion; however, Peckham continues, logic’s independence from context cannot substitute for the social nature

of discourse, ideology, and persuasion (50). Barbara Warnick extends field dependency to technology, arguing that the credibility (*ethos*) of a technologically-distributed argument is field dependent, not field independent (45), and Warnick suggests that technology itself is in part constitutive of the dependent field (48). I suggest the same is true for not only an argument's credibility, but for the validity of its *logos* and claim when technologically distributed. As Bolter and Grusin's remediation theory suggests, any argumentative claim is mediated by its various methods of construction and delivery. If remediation changes the textual values, then according to the theory of mediation the current selected form of mediation must be a new dependent field with new, varied qualities of *ethos*, *pathos*, *logos* and other rhetorical formations. Thus, technology is part of the social fabric of reading and interpreting discourse communities' delivery through or by technology. Each mediation necessarily forces reassessment on the part of the reader.

Even without mediation, the process of reading and interpreting the non-linear verbal/visual hybrid messages is a minefield of disjuncture, competing goals, and attentional focus. The social nature of discourse, whether through technological remediation, technologically-dependent fields, or technology's ascribing of a limiting role to the reader, challenges the transfer of a reader's typical heuristics and reading strategies because of the unpredictable nature and new form of each new idea, text, and rhetorical field.

Discourse Community as a Heuristic

Because technology introduces these multiple layers of difficulty into the reading process, I'd like to discuss how discourse communities can function as a heuristic for technologically invented or distributed public dialogue. Because various literature enumerates differently Swales' original concept of discourse community (1990, 24-27), I have chosen to draw the

largest enumeration of Swales because the larger enumeration makes for a larger set of questions for students to use toward interpretation. Koester (2010) enumerates Swales' discourse community as the following:

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

From these basic traits, instructors can generate appropriate questions detailing public dialogue in communities, the genres used, and the effects or use of technology. Yet as Koester points out, the above enumeration details only the use of discourse (8). Thus, we arrive at the goal of transforming discourse community into the context of public sphere dialogue and debate.

I'll provide several public writing issues in the final section of this article that extend the discourse community categories offered here. Many more questions can be generated from the powerful concept of discourse communities. Here are the topics covered thus far that may enhance class discussion or scaffold student interpretation.

Public Dialogue

Genre/stylistics: Does the genre, style, or linguistic convention change when shifting from internal community messages of the public sphere? Why or why not? Does the original style or genre shift due to changes in technological distribution? How? Formal to informal? Text to image?

Overlapping membership: What multiple community memberships exist in one or both sides of the dialogue? Which memberships are most prominent in the point of conflict? How does the reader have to accept a technologically-induced role to participate and interpret?

Success/failure of the message: Based upon consequent responses, how effective does the message seem to be? Are other participant communities responding sincerely? Snarkily? Is persuasion happening? Is the dialogue advancing, or is the original point of conflict still unsettled? What did a community have to surrender either stylistically or ideologically to be effective in the public sphere?

Technology

Remediation: What is the essential argument? Do some media garner better (more persuasive or dialogue-inducing) results? Is the message transformed over time or over technology? How do other communities summarize or paraphrase the argument differently over time?

Claims/reasons: When moving across media and gaining visuality, how are word and text used to separately represent claims and reasons? How do claims and reasons move between word and image as a message is remediated? Do you see implicit, constant, or purposeful uses of visuality, text, or space even as texts are remediated or altered? Is this of the community's doing or technology's?

Reading Role: What emotional dispositions might the technology (communication or materiality) itself offer to various users? Is the community in control of this secondary emotion? What role is a user/viewer of technology forced to accept? Can a reader actively participate or modify the text? How might the active or passive role change readers' response to the argument and dialogue presented?

Dependency/Validity: Which remediated and non-remediated messages appear more *logos*, *ethos*, or *pathos* based? Is this due to the technology's offerings (genre, visuality, video, etc.)? Is the community purposeful in its maximization of the above rhetorical effects through its technology selection?

Romberger adds two ecological categories that instructors may find useful when having students access the materiality of technology:

Exchanges: What are the relationships with other programs, hardware, and the operating system? What icons, terminology, and functions are

exchanged with or adopted from other software programs, hardware, or operating systems?

Evolutions: Is this item or aspect new? How has the new version changed it? Does it do more? Has it shifted location? (255)

In a composition classroom, the concept of discourse community as a heuristic can help outline not only the community, but its uses of technology as well. Instructors must include a space for interrogating technology in any heuristic given to students when assessing a community's values and activities. For the public writing course, heuristics should also engage inquiry into public dialogue. To not do so ignores the complicity of remediation, reading roles, and field dependency in a community's rhetoric.

Strategies for Reading a Problematic Public Sphere

Raymond Williams defined all media production--information or entertainment-- as "talking together about the processes of our common life" (Williams quoted by Curran 1997, 33). Any writing course examining cultural or public discourse must account for traditional genres (fiction, non-fiction, autobiography, newspaper article, academic article, etc.), but the course must also account for technologically distributed texts and a community's rhetorical use of technology. I'd suggest that a complete course must also account for the potential to be misread because of technology's influence on invention, stylistics, genre, and delivery. But separating texts that belong to the public sphere and public conversation and texts that are "entertainments" can create a false divide and omit the social and public impact of non-expository or non-argumentative texts. Thus, in my own public writing course, I opt to include a variety of texts and ask students to evaluate them as political statements.

James Curran argues that an inclusive theory of the public sphere must not be based upon only texts defined as rational-critical debate or texts that are “part of the flow of information between government and governed” (33). Rather, Curran argues that multimedia entertainment is as potent an argumentative weapon in the public sphere as political messages or propaganda. Entertainment can foster “empathetic insights [but] media entertainment can do the opposite: it can foster misunderstanding and antagonism through the repetition of stereotypes than provide a focus for displaced fears” (33). Thus, information and entertainment have a place in the public writing classroom.

Theoretically speaking, discourse communities cannot offer a complete analysis of the public sphere. John Trimbur (1997) has argued that left-wing critics are concerned that “social constructionist pedagogy runs the risk of limiting its focus to the internal workings of discourse communities and of overlooking the wider social forces that structure the production of knowledge” (440), and I would suggest that the same is true of using discourse communities as a heuristic to read socio-rhetorical activities. This section will summarize my three-semester history of teaching public writing to illustrate how I have carefully chosen debates from public sphere theory to augment and interrogate the reading of public groups and texts through only the concept of discourse community.

The first time I taught my departmental public writing course, *Writing-in-Communities*, a sophomore-level writing course required as an advanced writing course for a variety of liberal arts majors and typically populated with sophomore through seniors, I used only discourse community-based questions to help students interpret the variety of literature, informational, and multimedia texts we read and synthesized for low- to high-stakes writing assignments leading into their study and performance of public documents for a local discourse community. However, when using solely discourse community-based questions, I

found that students downplayed commentary on the process of technology and the political and popular culture genres it supported (music videos, newscasts, blogs, etc.). Students did not factor in how the technology may force a role onto the writer or reader or how genre constraints affected the message. We modeled the circulation and remediation of ideas by looking at publically offensive statements and apologies. To produce long-term modeling and a class project, we traced talk-radio shock jock Don Imus' offensive statement about the Rutgers' women's basketball team and Imus' subsequent apology from his own talk-radio show to national newspress in a variety of print and multimedia outlets. These included Al Sharpton's radio show, a network interview with Maya Angelou, and a variety of online news stories covering both the offense and the apology.

After this modeling, which traced circulation and remediation, when students performed their own analysis of a single issue across a variety of public texts, students did not extend their analysis as deep as I had hoped. Instead, students made one of several less penetrative interpretive moves:

- Students discussed the meaning of, for example, a hip-hop video as a message to be deconstructed, as opposed to discussing its reception by a variety of audiences (i.e. publics/communities) in a plural public sphere.
- Students imagined a text's reception in only a static or monolithic public sphere.
- Students considered popular forms of entertainment with political messages (a hip-hop video, for example) as a text to be received by only the community that produced it.

As I have now prepared to teach the course additional times, I sought scaffolding and heuristics for my students by reading specifically on public sphere and counterpublic theory to locate critical junctures. My goal was to turn public sphere theory into practices that may help students focus on a text's political message, discuss how its technological medium of delivery may affect (through remediation) a "core" message. I also wanted students to assess

how culture and attendant linguistic and rhetorical activity enters and is received by a plural public sphere that is constructed of multiple publics, yet holds within it mainstream, dominant codes and values that carry the threat of hegemony at any time.

One concept I introduced into my own course is the complication of the idea of a solitary or monolithic public sphere. Complicating (making plural) the concept of the sphere helped students remember that there is no “standard” reception for a text. Although I didn’t present theorists for this sophomore-level writing course, I presented ideas from a variety of public sphere debates, which allowed both my own and the class’s concept of the public sphere a variety of conversations and textures that increased the types of questions we could ask of texts and dialogue between communities.

The Complicated Public Sphere

In “Rogue Cops and Health Care: What Do We Want from Public Writing?” Susan Wells (2010) summarizes the original theory of the public sphere, as defined by Jurgen Habermas where the public sphere is not “a kind of writing, or an ensemble of genres” (153). Nor was the original formulation of the public sphere ever utopian, based upon forms of inclusion, or rendered as a preexisting site. Wells states that “[p]ublic discourse is a complex array of discursive practices, including forms of writing, speech, and media performance, historically situated and contested” (153). Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer (2001) posit that the term Public suggests something potentially open to all, concerning all, known to all, or constituted by all; however, “[p]refixing ‘counter’ to these multiple meanings of ‘public’ instigates a rich and varied set of conceptual understandings” (9). Nancy Fraser (1994) supplies a cultural critique of the public sphere based upon race, gender, and class. Fraser argues that

Women of all classes and ethnicities were excluded from official political participation precisely on the basis of ascribed gender status, while plebeian men were formally excluded by property qualifications. Moreover, in many cases, women and men of racialized ethnicities of all classes were excluded on racial grounds. (80)

Rita Felski (1989), interested in feminist counterpublics, illustrates the process through which counterpublics are created. She opines that “cultural dislocation provides the impetus for the development of a self-consciously oppositional identity” (167) that builds a counterpublic whose “arguments are directed outward” toward other publics in the public sphere (167). Clearly the multiple genres, discursive practices, and oppositional values of the many communities and counterpublics make the public sphere a site of complex interaction. Based upon my own experience, instructors of public writing courses should present it as such immediately, and instructors should adopt heuristics and questions to force students to consider interaction and reception by multiple publics. My own heuristical questions shall appear in the following section.

Public Mode, Not Discourse Community, as Heuristic

Robert Asen and Daniel C. Brouwer also argue for a highly complex and plural public sphere in *Public Modalities: Rhetoric, Culture, Media and the Shape of Public Life* (2010). The pair suggests that the public sphere is best interpreted through a concept of modality because all lenses for theories of the public sphere(s) are metaphorical/modal in nature. Modality is a way proceeding (17), and each modality renders visible particular counterpublic interactions. I will now summarize several of Asen and Brouwer’s modes that I found useful in my own public writing course. I will forego those that I did not include. Also, I will not be

fully summarizing Brouwer and Asen's work. Interested readers should read the introduction to *Public Modalities* for a full picture of their theory. I will discuss their modal theory through a framework of practical pedagogical application in a public writing course.

Asen and Brouwer begin with the default Habermasian metaphor of "sphere," which, like Wells, they argue suggests a social space for discourse, but not a particular locale (4). Moreover, the metaphor of "sphere" suggests that "[s]patial language also may present a synchronic picture of publicity. Spatial representations convey public engagement as a process that develops over time" (4-5), and recognizing *sphere* as a metaphor is to recognize the limits of rhetorical analysis of public debate. The pair suggest that "sphere calls attention to shared features among diverse discourse practices" (5). Together, these critiques suggest that conceptualizing the public as a *sphere* potentially eliminates historical texturing and historical development. Theoretically, the problem is similar to critiques of the concept of discourse community, wherein interaction and opposition are veiled. In terms of developing a reading strategy for students of a public writing course, students require a heuristic (or metaphor/modality) other than *sphere*, and discussing the metaphorical aspect of sphere was an odd, challenging, but fruitful, conversation with my students as we wrestled with the rhetorical and metaphorical dimensions of controlling metaphors. I'd suggest students need to be made aware of the metaphorical nature of many of our societal models so as to denaturalize their function and operative principles. In a public writing course, having students question dominant metaphors is one method of critiquing ways of knowing or individual, field dependent debate.

I find that the concept of "discourse community" is similar to a lens that Brouwer and Asen term, simply, "culture." Asen and Brouwer's "culture" lens includes the initial texts of my own course—popular culture texts that I wanted students to read as ideological—texts

and publics from “music, sport, domestic life and leisure or entertainment venues [...]” (14). These are texts and genres that are instances of “affective communication” such as “modes of melodrama, sentimentality, and humor, for example” (14). As mentioned, students struggled to read the ideological or interactional aspects of the communities and publics these texts represented. Thus, the following three heuristical questions aided our critique of all texts as public texts.

Counterpublic Inquiry #1: The Gray Area of Private and Public

Affective communication is a reminder that easy delineations of public and private are not black and white. As Craig Warner (2002) asserts, “the impression seems to be that public and private are abstract categories for thinking about law, politics, and economics. And so they are. But their power, as feminism and queer theory have had to insist, goes much deeper” (23). Sex in primetime, homophobia on reality television, same-sex marriage debates, debates over the limits of faith in politics: These and similar sensitive issues explore the line between what behavior or ideas should be constrained to the home versus what should appear in public. Concepts such as illegality versus immoral but legal fall in line with the public/private binary as well.

Both the behavior and public discussion of the issue are open to an analysis through publics’ differing ideas of private and public. However, Warner further asserts that “But in the modern period, [...] privacy has taken on a distinctive value of its own, in several different registers: as freedom, individuality, inwardness, authenticity, and so on” (28). Thus, instructors may wish to engage students in a discussion of the rhetorical function of “privacy” (or “public-ness”). The concepts of freedom, individuality, and other qualities highly valued by American society are in part defined by privacy. Exploring how privacy is defined and

used helps students contextualize the often decontextualized ideas mentioned by Warner above.

In general, the process wherein the private becomes public suggests that issues considered private to the public may, indeed, be the very issues that a community wishes to make public for reasons of debate, recognition, and equality. I have found that a heuristic based upon private versus public automatically forces students to acknowledge multiple communities and publics responding to an issue. One group's publicity is another's privacy, immorality, or illegality. Having students articulate these differences is an excellent start on pluralizing the public sphere.

Counterpublic Inquiry #2: Tracing Circulation to Discover Remediation and Historical Change

Introducing the concept of circulation aided my students' abilities to identify gains, losses, or changes in debates over time or through multimedia reposts, stories off the cyber-wire, or public dialogue. Circulation lends itself in particular to technology and multimedia and is important "especially now, in the twenty-first century, when the texts of public circulation are very often visual or at any rate no longer mediated by the codex format" (Warner 16).

For instance, my previous explanation of my tracing of Don Imus' offensive remarks, subsequent apology, and reaction to the apology allowed students to trace historical change over the brief period of time the story circulated heavily in both online and traditional media. Students can see public dialogue in action as participants from different publics react and respond to both the offense and the apology, focusing their own response on particular rhetorical moves Imus made in his offense and apology. Students can also see how media or

publics with similar reactions share values and circulate them through similar responses. Finally, students can see how one public's message may, for instance, come across as more coherent or less coherent depending upon the form of media distribution. Highly visual media allow for more emotion to be displayed compare to print media, even if the message is similar. Instructors can often find the manuscript of a show and have students analyze the script linguistically before having students view and analyze a visual or video medium.

Circulation also offers the opportunity to discuss how a public's attention is gained and formed. According to Warner, attention is based upon textual issues, which means that cultural and community ideology is downplayed in his definition. Warner argues that surveys and data seek to define publics empirically, but such methods do not provide expression or operative logics. He states that "any empirical extension of the public will seem arbitrarily limited because the addressee of public discourse is always yet to be realized" (73). Thus, publics for Warner are text-based. They are "imaginary" (73) because a text "unites strangers through participation" (75). This approach to counterpublic theory—a text-based approach downplaying a more essentialist ideological approach--allows students to challenge the idea of an aggregate or unchanging discourse community. Moreover, circulation allows for students to analyze the effects of remediation and historical change as a public dialogue circulates through a variety of media that differ in both technological and ideological context.

Counterpublic Inquiry #3: Issues or Ideology?

Gerard Hauser (1999) advocates for an issue-based public sphere, as opposed to a public sphere based in community or counterpublic. Asen and Brouwer (2010) critique Hauser for representing all participants as equal and for suggesting that all groups seek to listen to each other and no discourse seeks to exclude other discourses in the public sphere (6).

These ideas, too, of a discourse silencing another, or of an issue-based collective of people, opens up class discussion and forces students to acknowledge multiple publics.

Hauser's emphasis on public debate as issue-based allows for a multi-pronged reading strategy. Students must evaluate whether or not texts and artifacts illustrate or suggest a discourse community or counterpublic. For example, in fall of 2011, the Zucotti Park 99% protests may appear to be unified because of the shared physical space of the people amassed. However, the protest and its encampment is/was comprised of a plurality of groups qualifying as discourse communities (anarchists, college students, and labor, for example), but the park also contained groups that are typically read as individuals, not membership groups (the unemployed, for instance). Thus, reading and writing on current political events such as the 99% movement will certainly benefit from Hauser's suggestion that the dialogue of the public sphere is predicated upon issues. This allows students to imagine new alternatives: communities may take up an issue or be divided on an issue; large social movements may be a collective of publics or issues gathered under a large umbrella. In terms of classroom discussion, this means that certain issues can be read as a variety of communities joining together for a cause, yet remaining separate in both their reasoning and goals for solving the public inequality. This forces students to read for dissension where consensus seems probable.

Regarding issue-based public rhetoric (for example, Hauser's) across media, Brouwer and Asen select the metaphor of "network/web" because of the "intersections without a center" inherent in public discourse as well as technologically-mediated public discourse. The pair argue that "blogs host discussions about a range of social, cultural, economic, and political issues, while also linking to other discursive sites, whether blogs, newspaper Web pages, organizational Web pages, and others" (7). In comparison with the monolithic metaphor of sphere, network/web provides a mechanism to follow the temporal development

of public discourse (7), and discursivity is acknowledged through either discourse community or technological remediation as well.

However, an issue-based reading strategy cannot construct an outline of community. Rather, reading public dialogue through an “issue” lens may suggest either *no communities* or *many communities* exist in a public issue. Instructors using this lens will find it helpful in challenging students’ assumptions that all individuals ascribe to their appropriate community standards (African-Americans to African-American politics and ideologies, for example). Moreover, the issue-based rhetoric allows for students to understand a single proposition as complex enough to be the result of a variety of discourse communities’ differing logics or political goals. The journey is different for each community, even if the desired result is shared amongst communities. Naturally, a discussion such as this opens the door for discussions of how plural communities or publics convened around a common goal may have conflict with each other during or after attainment of said goal.

Conclusion: Reading Publics to Write as a Member of a Public

The problem of entering a discourse community is as difficult as reading it. But because literature on public writing courses strongly endorses having students enter a community or public to write, I’d like to briefly discuss the challenge of students writing their way into discourse communities.

R.W. Burniske (2008) documents how students have trouble negotiating formal (mainly educational) and informal discourses in synchronous online writing. In pedagogical terms, Burniske suggests that “the greatest challenge for classroom teachers, however, is deciding what to do when students confuse these discursive styles” (42). Students suffering

from Burniske's noted problems struggle with discourse choices because the spatial arrangement of the popular genre "blog" triggers an automatic spoken-level of writing common in blogs, which is common when one views genre as a social phenomenon (Miller 1984; Freedman 1994). As Ann M. Johns (2002) intones, "genre has become a term that refers to complex oral or written responses by speakers or writers to the demands of a social context" (3).

We must ask how modeling a reading of discourse community could help students better identify and negotiate formal and informal discourses as they leave and enter academic and non-academic discourse communities in public, on-line, or in their own lives. Mark Warschauer (2002) has suggested that when entering discourse communities, students should provide scaffolding for each other, which corresponds to "a peripheral participation model of apprenticeship learning" (47). Past research indicates that "learners in diverse settings learn best by limited but andsteadily increasing participation on the periphery of the communities they seek to enter" (47). Warschauer's suggestion is applicable both theoretically and practically in our classrooms. Requiring students to enter blogging communities provides one type of non-academic writing through technology.

However, this non-academic blogging is very different from asking students to write in the sociorhetorical codes of a public community or issue. This requires preparing documents that meet a community's linguistic membership standards. It also entails knowledge of appropriate public distribution, technological or otherwise. Although the variety of assignment and political issue is variable, I would suggest that having students study a community's discourse and technology, then having students engage the community through an activist forum (pamphleteering, web messaging and promotional materials, public panel organizations, community event organizing, local histories for the purposes of a local

society, etc.) is one way to allow students to translate their academic practice into public production.

The strengths of these forms of public writing are well-documented by Sid Dobrin and Christian Weisser (2006), who suggest studying discourse communities through an ecological rhetoric to allow a focus on the local circumstances of communities' and issues' space and place. The pair argue that the "primary agenda" must be "the study of the relationships among all environments and the production of written discourse; production, not interpretation, is the cornerstone" (486). Deans, too, suggests that students must enter the public fray. He proposes "*writing for* and *writing with* modes because those kinds of service-learning invite students to use writing itself as a tool to expand their involvement in activity and genre systems beyond college classrooms and academic disciplines" (452).

I agree wholeheartedly that students must write as an incipient member of a community. But reading and interpretation itself is a difficult challenge that must be properly scaffolded before students can write as members of a community. Good reading, properly scaffolded, paves a road for an understanding of the community, eventual community membership, and appropriate writing for that community, whether in the public writing classroom or the culturally-engaged writing classroom in general. Good reading and interpretation also helps students understand the values, genres, and discourse of the community amongst competing voices in the public sphere. For a proper understanding of their own public memberships, the scope of civic participation, and profiling public dialogues, students must analyze communities interacting and competing with each other. Not only must instructors provide specific public discourse heuristics for students, they must provide heuristics that are useful for technology, new media, and cyber-publics as well.

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