

Community, Spirituality, and the Writing Classroom

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\$4,200. As best as I can calculate it, that's the amount of money I've spent over the last 10 years on potato chips, lollipops, bagels, pretzels, and donuts for my writing students. If I walk into class on a peer review day and don't have a bag of hard candy to share, I feel like I'm not doing my job.

Many of you know that feeling—the need to “break bread” with students, the desire to have them feel at ease, to bond. But why do we need it to do it? After all, on a poor teacher's budget, it can become a very expensive habit. For me, the answer is community. I've discovered the best way to get the challenging work of writing done is when students feel as if they are part of a productive writing community in a safe atmosphere that values critical feedback and intellectual risk-taking. For some inexplicable reason, food seems to be the shortest route to that communal state of mind.

Of course, the topic of community in rhetoric and composition isn't a new one by any means. Over a decade ago, scholars in this discipline were consumed with the idea of community and its impact on writing pedagogy. As social constructionists began to take expressivists and cognitivists to task, ideas regarding the function and form of community in writing classrooms abounded in many academic journals. Conference presentations and writing textbooks offered teachers and students innumerable community-building techniques, from sharing food to collaborative learning. All the while, experts (many of whom were polarized on the topic) argued over the definition, usefulness, and universality of the term. Clearly, in the late 1980s, talk of community within the discipline had become so ubiquitous that it attained the status of lore.

Unfortunately, like many once contentious issues, the scholarly debate over the definition of community has passed into obscurity. Those participating in the conversation reached a theoretical stalemate, and the discussion more or less petered out. Thus, while academic debate highlighted the potential benefits of community building, leading to the centrality of community in writing classrooms, it left unresolved crucial issues about that community.

As a teacher who has spent some time investigating the spiritual dimensions of teaching and learning, I believe that spirituality plays a role in further deepening our theoretical understanding of community. Frankly, when I revisit the earliest scholarly discussions about community in rhetoric and composition, I find them lacking: the arguments being offered at the time often suffer from binary thinking, and that extreme polarization prematurely closed off an exciting, multi-faceted

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story. I believe spirituality, particularly the ways that spiritually-based communities embrace paradox, can break through the theoretical impasse that has characterized our academic conversation about writing communities and reignite conversation about classroom community building. To this end, I will examine the evolution of the scholarly debate about community, complicate it from a spiritual perspective, and offer an alternative way to explore and discuss community as it applies to the discipline of rhetoric and composition.

The Evolution of “Community”

In the late 1980s, the term “discourse community” suddenly appeared in our disciplinary lexicon. Scholars in rhetoric and composition appropriated and altered the phrase “speech community” from the field of linguistics and used “discourse community” to explore concepts of community in writing environments. Clearly, the acquisition and widespread use of such discipline-specific terminology helped to professionalize the burgeoning field of composition studies, and many authors worked diligently to define the term in its new context. In a 1986 article titled “Intertextuality and the Discourse Community,” James Porter explained that a discourse community is “a group of individuals bound by a common interest who communicate through approved channels and whose discourse is regulated” (38). In “Approaching the Concept of Discourse Community,” John Swales expanded this definition by telling us that members of a discourse community possess “an embedded dynamic towards increasingly shared and specialized terminology” (1). Perhaps one of the better known theorists regarding community was David Bartholomae, who used the term academic discourse community in his article “Inventing the University” to characterize the multifaceted college or university environment that all first-year students are attempting to join (4).

Though these selective, simplified definitions have individual nuances and sometimes conflicting foci, there is a common denominator present: each relies on the core idea that members within a community are, at base, similar, in some way. Members of a discourse community are drawn together because they have “shared goals” and “a common interest.” And it is precisely the similarities among them that allow discourse to be produced—hence a “shared terminology.” Indeed, prior to 1989, there was consensus among many scholars that community implied a togetherness—a cohesion—and this cohesion was predicated on the inherent, or “embedded,” similarities of community members (linguistic or otherwise).

It didn’t take long, however, before new voices entered the conversation to expand and complicate this definition of community. First, these individuals focused less on the linguistic properties of a narrowly defined discourse community and more on the larger, more dynamic notion of community and how the concept manifested itself in our discipline and classrooms (Harris). Second, these individuals argued that differences within a community, and not simply similarities, played important roles in blocking and producing discourse. Focusing primarily on the inherent differences and inequalities that exist among members of any community, some scholars argued that the term was better defined as a polyphonous chorus of voices simultaneously speaking in unison and at cross purposes. For example, Marilyn Cooper and Michael Holzman’s *Writing as Social Action* argue that community should be defined heterogeneously, and that generic notions of community—such as an “academic discourse community”—were too

simplicistic: “Our students’ purposes in coming to college are various. Except at an extremely general level, it is hard to discern a shared purpose and shared values of what is called the academic discourse community” (217). In “Consensus and Difference in Collaborative Learning,” John Trimbur states that there is great validity in analyzing not simply how shared goals help to produce discourse, but also how “differences in interest produce conflicts that may block communication and prohibit discourse” (611). Contrary to earlier notions of community, scholars demanded that we, as representatives of an academic discipline, pay attention to the intrinsic differences—and the inequities and exclusionary forces—found in nearly every community. The function of similarity within communal settings seemed to become a much less important topic of discussion and one that potentially ignored the messy reality of communities in our world.

Unfortunately, due to this polarization, a number of scholars eventually suggested a dismantling of the term altogether. For example, Thomas Kent contends that the concept of community unnecessarily imprisons speakers and writers and encourages skepticism and relativism (425). David Foster questions how the term has been used by scholars:

Deep inequities of race, gender, and class still exist. The world is fragmented into many contending voices which cannot be reconciled or communalized, [and] efforts to soften or harmonize voices of anger and frustration by invoking a woolly liberal vision of communal harmony just doesn’t cut it. (8)

Though I am simplifying a rather complex academic discussion, I do so in an attempt to show its general trajectory: researchers initially focused on the inclusive nature of communities and the form and function of similarity within them; this was eventually problematized by a call to examine the inherent differences among members of any community and the exclusionary forces that communities can sometimes exert; finally, due in part to this polarization, the issue of community within the field of rhetoric and composition reached a critical impasse.

Despite this impasse, community building activities within the writing classroom continued to be a widely accepted practice. A quick perusal of writing texts over the last decade suggests that a healthy sense of community—and a healthy dose of collaboration among students and teachers—leads to a more productive learning environment. While there may be some disagreement among teachers about how to best build a community, most are convinced that the classroom should be a safe, secure environment where students feel comfortable taking risks (Bushman; Calkins; Dale; Gere; Koch). Further, many teachers believe in the importance of engaging in routine community-building activities of some kind, such as sharing writing, co-authoring, collaboratively designing class syllabi, and cooperatively choosing texts. Although the pros and cons of collaborative pedagogies have been discussed at length by teachers and researchers, I raise the issue of community-building activities in the writing classroom for one purpose only: our emphasis on doing things to create a sense of community in our writing classrooms is at odds with some spiritual approaches to community that emphasize being over doing.

What Can Spirituality Teach Us About Community?

Clearly, our communal debate raised many questions that remain unanswered. Are members of a community distinguished by their similarities or differences? Is the primary function of a community to include or exclude? Do communities encourage relativism? Should we actively create and maintain community within the writing classroom, or is community building a practice that needs to be problematized?

While wrestling with these rather large questions (that clearly have multiple answers), I wondered if authors outside the discipline of rhetoric and composition might expand my understanding of community. And because of my interest in the spiritual side of writing and learning, I decided to consult a source that has had a profound impact on my own spiritual development: *The Spirituality of Imperfection* by Ernest Kurtz and Katherine Ketcham. Kurtz and Ketcham discuss the idea of community in ways not broached by scholars of rhetoric and composition—a discussion that, I believe, greatly expands the binary positions presented in the academic debate so far.

Before entering the particulars of that discussion, however, it would be prudent for me to explain the basic principles that undergird a spirituality of imperfection. It is not itself a religious movement or doctrine; instead it merely suggests a particular kind of orientation or attitude that makes us available to our spiritual selves. A spirituality of imperfection, according to Kurtz and Ketcham, is based upon the idea that we are flawed. The source of our humanity is our very ordinary and imperfect nature. Though many of us strive for perfection, such striving keeps us separate from our humanity, hence, our spirituality. Perfection denies the reality of our humanity, and it is within our human-ness as flawed beings that our spirituality (and ultimately community) finds its home. A spirituality of imperfection requires that we come face-to-face with ourselves as flawed, and through this admission we find not despair but the freedom and peace to be imperfect, always with an attitude towards “getting better.” In addition, Kurtz and Ketcham believe it is this common, shared acknowledgement of flawed-ness that creates mutuality, the condition that allows people to come together without fear or facades.

In essence, a spirituality of imperfection rests upon the paradoxical statement that people can be “made whole by the acceptance of limitation” and that they are able to participate wholly in community (Kurtz 197). To further describe this idea of a spiritually-sensitive community, the authors present four key components: (1) Community is dis-covered, or uncovered, when we (2) allow ourselves to be found by others who are (3) different, or limited, in the same ways we are. Finally, (4) because human beings are essentially imperfect and limited, any relationship we enter into with other human beings can only ever be limited as well. For this reason, communities are limited, and this means they are inclusive and exclusive simultaneously. Belief in community requires embracing the paradoxical nature of them as both inclusive and exclusive (Kurtz and Ketcham 229).

The best way to understand the relevance of this definition is to apply it to our disciplinary concept of community. For example, the pedagogical emphasis in rhetoric and composition over the past 20 years has clearly been on creating community. In our teaching tradition, classroom exercises are designed to help bring people together to solve common problems. As teachers, we do things, and

ask our students to do things, in order to build community. Large projects are created in ways that the entire community can share in their completion. Various routines are established, and language is shaped, to help promote and nurture a communal identity. But what about the importance of being? The first two statements made by Kurtz and Ketcham clearly emphasize being over doing; community is dis-covered when we allow ourselves to be found by others. From this spiritual perspective, being becomes a kind of bridge that draws humans together. These authors suggest that community is uncovered, not made; additionally, members of a community allow themselves to be found by others, instead of actively, or in some cases willfully, joining in. Indeed, an exclusive focus on doing is precisely what can thwart a spirit of community; paradoxically, finding our “fit” in a particular community may require a certain passivity on our part.

Following this reasoning, community is not something that can be planned; it is not something we possess. Nevertheless, community is absolutely something we can experience if we adopt a certain attitude. A community is always there, but it needs to be dis-covered, somehow brought into our experience. Such a place, the kind of community we call home, is discovered rather than created, found rather than made. Too many speak too glibly about creating community by ‘sharing thoughts, feelings, stories.’ But community requires more than the sharing of stories—true community requires the discovery of a story that is shared. (240)

Kurtz and Ketcham suggest that community is best realized when there is, at least, a balance of being and doing. Generally speaking, I believe that mainstream pedagogy in the discipline of rhetoric and composition has not attempted to strike this important balance.

The third statement above—members within a community are different, or limited, in the same ways we are—speaks to the issue of similarity and difference among members of a community. As previously discussed, scholars initially focused on how similarities among members of communities helped to produce discourse; in essence, shared goals and interests lead to a shared terminology. The locus of this discussion then shifted to an examination of the inherent differences among members of all communities, and how an imbalance of power or authority can inhibit discourse. These arguments, when juxtaposed, represent either/or thinking; it’s either similarities or differences. Personally, I always felt trapped by this binary. This is one of the reasons why Kurtz and Ketcham’s definition (which embraces the paradox instead of pushing against the binary) is so appealing. According to them, communities are discovered when, paradoxically, similarities and differences are in play simultaneously. When individuals acknowledge their own limitations and the ways they differ from others, they can finally find their “fit” in a community with others who are also different. In a spirituality of imperfection, polar opposites converge; similarity and difference become interrelated in a way that they no longer make sense individually. Our differences allow us to identify one another and come together as flawed members of a flawed community. Ultimately, the focus is not on similarity or difference but on similarity in difference.

Related to this issue are the ideas of inclusivity and exclusivity. Do communities inherently act to include members or exclude strangers? In other words, do the boundaries between communities function to keep members in or keep foreigners out? Some scholars (Foster; Kent) have argued that if the primary

function of a community is to exclude, then this has no place within our pedagogy. On the other hand, if the purpose of community activity building is to provide a feeling of inclusion, we will claim it as a pedagogical tool because a feeling of belonging can enrich the classroom experience. However, as Kurtz and Ketcham's fourth statement above illustrates, this too is a binary that can be dismantled. Within a spirituality of imperfection, communities are comprised of imperfect human beings; they are, therefore, inherently flawed. And, because communities are flawed, they are both powerfully inclusive and exclusive; paradoxically, boundaries act to keep us together and keep us apart. Although many see boundaries as a de facto negative force, Kurtz and Ketcham argue that boundaries are important for their positive function: They define us. By setting limits in a way that gives identity, telling us who we are and who we are not, they make it possible for us to fit, to belong, and so to feel—and be—good. Without boundaries we would not exist. Boundaries establish space, that internal quality that is the capacity of letting some reality be present to us and for us. In this ancient understanding, boundary is not that through which something ceases to be, but rather that from which something begins to be what is, is free to be what is. (237)

From this perspective, boundaries, and the communities they establish, are protective rather than limiting. Indeed, the exclusive nature of communities allows them to be inclusive, protective; a boundaried community provides members with a place to seek sanctuary, to hide if need be, to heal. In a sense, exclusivity begets inclusivity; both parts of the equation are necessary to discover a community. By acknowledging the essential paradox that undergirds community, we open up community building in our classrooms.

Community, Spirituality, and Donuts

Embracing these sometimes paradoxical ideas can be challenging; putting them into practice in the writing classroom even more so. While I can confidently say spirituality has enriched the way I think and feel about community in my own classroom, I don't believe my teaching routine has changed in dramatic ways because of these connections. I chalk this up to the fact that, in my opinion, the spiritual and material worlds are sometimes incommensurate with one another. Indeed, the word spiritual was originally coined to denote "that which is not material" (Adler 1). Fashioning a concrete curriculum from these spiritual insights, in one sense, flies against the ephemeral nature of the spirit. Many teachers and researchers have confronted this paradox. For example, in "Grace, in Pedagogy," Richard L. Graves discusses this struggle, and he suggests that spirituality cannot be planned—for him, it is essential that we relinquish our impulse to "curricularize" spirituality: "It is not something that can be called up at will, planned on, or included in a syllabus[. . .]. Grace cannot be formally included or incorporated into a curriculum or mandated into a school system" (16, 20). This clearly problematizes any efforts at designing a formula for creating spiritual communities within our classrooms. Kurtz and others would suggest that any kind of classroom-community-formula is simply anathema to spirituality because "spirituality is, always, beyond control. We can't hold it in our hands, or touch it, manipulate it, or destroy it. Because it is beyond control, it is also beyond possession: We can't own it, lock it up, divide it among ourselves, or take it away from others" (31). A similar caveat is offered by Mary Rose O'Reilly in *Radical*

Presence: Teaching as Contemplative Practice. She emphasizes the importance of realizing the divide between technique, which is located in the “utilitarian world of what works and doesn’t work,” and spirituality, which addresses the much more ephemeral question of who we are (14). O’Reilley’s distinction illustrates how spirituality and material pedagogy can be incommensurate: pedagogy is driven by our want, as teachers, to “do” something to make our classrooms better places to live and learn, and spirituality asks us to listen, to be present, to be open, and to be still in order to learn how we can best participate with and be present to those around us.

On the other hand, I realize that teachers still have practical concerns: “What activities might help to dis-cover a community? How do members of a community allow themselves to be found? How do I distinguish between being and doing? How do I strike a balance between the two?” Indeed, I’ve asked these questions of myself repeatedly, and I continue to do so. Over time, I’ve attempted to shape a personal pedagogy that responds to some of them; unfortunately, my spotty success makes my classroom approach a questionable model. After all, as O’Reilley warns, “Please don’t try anything I’ve done and don’t try anything that the Board of Education or the latest *College English* recommends: rather lie down in the Lamb’s patience and follow the deepest leadings of your own heart and your own tradition” (14). By following this excellent advice, I can honestly say I have learned one lesson worth passing along: my own attitude toward openness is more important than any spiritually-sensitive curriculum I might create. My own willingness as a teacher to be dis-covered and allow my differences, my weaknesses, to be revealed to my students is central to nurturing community in my classroom. I have learned that if I am on guard, my students will be on guard; if I am ruled by a fear of being found, my students will sense this and respond by closing themselves off to community. If I am a whirlwind of activity, I may be distracting others from realizing a mindful community. In other words, my first steps toward uncovering community are to face myself squarely, to relinquish my own fear, and to acknowledge and release my facade. This risky, challenging attitude allows me to be present to opportunities for community as they arise in the classroom, while allowing my students the space to dis-cover the ways they might “fit” together. It provides me with a lens to see when I am talking too much, when I am not listening enough, when my assignments or directions are too prescriptive, when my own willfulness is in full swing. Adopting such a mindful attitude, and allowing change within, takes courage for both students and teachers; it requires an unconditional “letting go” of control, of ego, of fear— and embracing the terrifying reality that there is no guarantee of success.

Unless, of course, you bring donuts. ☺

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