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A Visual Model of Rhetorical Ecology

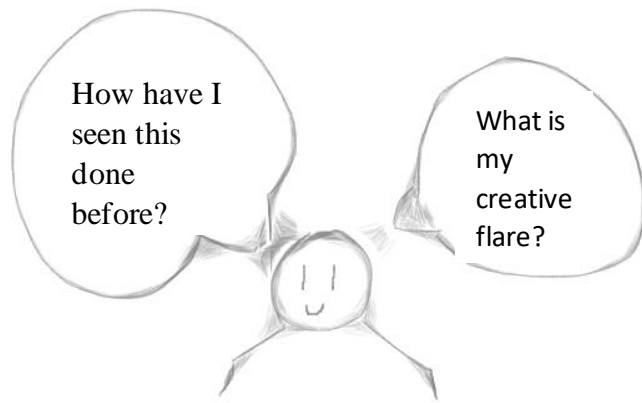
Reflection:

The comprehension of rhetorical studies is a feat that can be challenging. It is comprised of new ideas like discourse communities further complexified by concepts like genres whose definitions are still under debate by scholars. One can lose track of the threads tying the theories together; Amy Devitt, an internationally recognized scholar, once wrote how "Describing the social significance of genre is at once both necessary and impossible" (33). This topped with the fact that there are three broad schools of thought for genre theory alone elucidates how one can be, at least, a little confused and intimidated when approaching this topic (Hyland 114).

However, once one attains a firm grasp on the ideas, it opens doors to new ways of thinking and insight into the functioning of culture. Applying the concepts of rhetorical ecology to research is particularly promising, allowing for new approaches to well-grounded historical and contemporary information. So, how could one make available these complex ideas to those lacking in resources and understanding? The purpose of this work is to provide an article to do just that. The article takes the viewer step by step through a breakdown of rhetorical ecology. It is also directly catered toward younger audiences and written in the second person to be more engaging to that audience

I. The Rhetorical Ecology

The term "Rhetorical Ecology" can be intimidating. So, let's break it down into words that are not so scary. Rhetoric in this context means "the way one writes and produces written work"; for example, this can mean how one creates a poem. Ecology means "the environment one lives



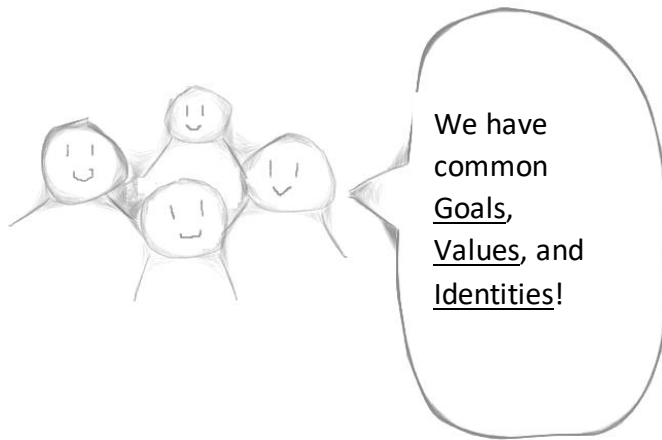
in." So, rhetorical ecology means "how one creates written work in their environment."

Anis Bawarshi, a researcher of rhetorical ecology, states that both the environment and the author are responsible for the work the author creates (69). This is because

authors are always influenced, at least a little, by their culture and environment. Let's go back to that poem example. If you were writing a poem, you would think back to what your teacher taught you; "How was I supposed to structure poems again?", "I make it rhyme, right?" "It is supposed to be super metaphorical, isn't it?". That is your environment. Teachers, other poems that you've read, and your friends are all part of your environment. They are the external factors that influence your written work. However, you are also part of the writing process. The unique flare you bring when you sit down to write something is included in that "Rhetorical Ecology." This is actually why rhetorical ecologies are continually changing because authors are always adding new ideas to the environment and recreating the rhetorical ecology. Even the article you are reading right now is recreating the rhetorical ecology. That being said, rhetorical ecologies don't just affect individuals; within a rhetorical ecology, one can find discourse communities.

II. Discourse Communities

A Discourse community, like a rhetorical ecology, is an idea that will take some illustration to understand fully. However, it is somewhat self-explanatory. It has the word "community" and is something like a community. A discourse community is made up of many different people; a researcher named Amy Devitt compares it to a city because it is so diverse (38). One person can also be a part of many discourse communities, so it is quite challenging to say where a discourse community begins and ends (Devitt 38). Nevertheless, you can tell a discourse community by its

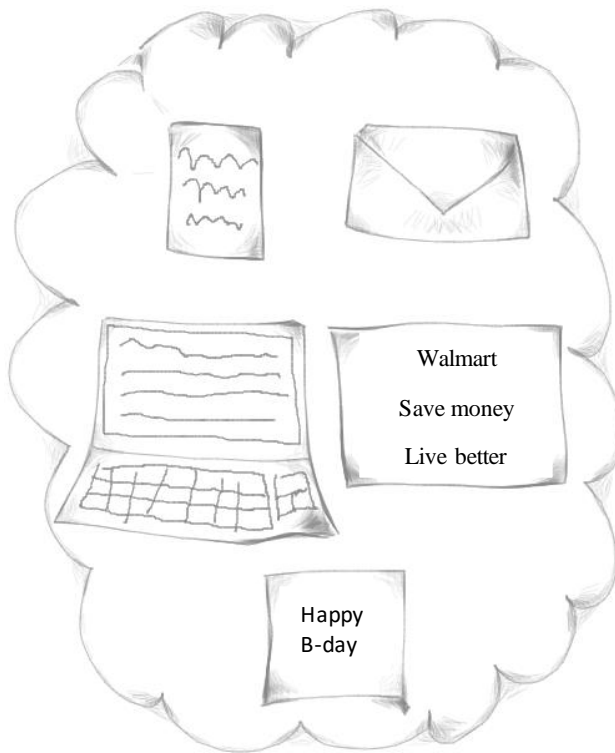


participants' common goals, values, and identities (Devitt 39). To summarize, a discourse community is a diverse group of individuals sharing a common discourse and sharing common features. But how does this apply in our everyday life? Think about a poetry club at school. This poetry

club is filled with students, each creating different kinds of poetry. Yet, there is a common goal they all strive for in the club, to create wonderful poems. The easiest way to tell what this discourse community's shared goals, values, and identities are is through papers and texts the club hands out. Perhaps their motto is "Creativity, Originality, and Determination," which can be found on their website telling exactly their values. This poetry club is a discourse community, and even you can analyze it and how it works with knowledge of discourse communities. However, discourse communities can be exceedingly different, and it can be hard to find out precisely what one's goals are. That is where genre comes in.

III. Genre

When you think of a genre, you likely think of the different kinds of movies you can find on Netflix, horror, action, romance, comedy, etc. However, genre means something different in this context. Genre in the context of rhetorical studies "are the sites in which communicants rhetorically reproduce the very environments to which they in turn respond" (Bawarshi 71). That can be a confusing definition to understand, so let's think of it a little differently. Think about a



poem. Why are poems created the way they are? Why are they structured in specific ways with unique systems like iambic pentameter?

It's because someone invented it. Poetry is a medium filled with genres. A haiku is a particular genre of poetry and is a site produced by past writers in the rhetorical ecology. New writers reinvent the haiku genre as they write new haikus and "reproduce the environment." So, genres are these locations that people have created and keep recreating as

they use them. But how can one identify a genre? Genres each contain unique features that separate them from each other. For example, in a book, one genre may be when the book is in the first person focused on the main character, which contrasts with its other first-person genre focused on a different character. Remember, genres are very specific things, and in the same way, a book can contain many different genres. Genres may also have subgenres. Take the first-person focus on the main character example. This genre may have the subgenres of intense-

fighting, conversation, and inner dialogue. However, it is important to know that one can analyze a discourse community through its genres.

IV. Why does this Matter?

Now that you know and understand the concepts "Rhetorical Ecology," "Discourse Community," and "Genre," you are probably wondering, "why does any of this matter?" These ideas can be used in conjunction to analyze culture and social phenomena. Say you wanted to learn how Walmart's managers were trained and improve that training. First, you would identify the groups that were included in this training. Then you would identify the discourse community whose goal was to train the employees. To analyze this discourse community, you would then want to find the community's mediums and analyze its genres. These genres contain information on the functioning of the discourse community and how it functions within Walmart's rhetorical ecology. After analyzing how the community trains employees, you can identify areas that need improvement and improve them! Although this seems tedious, it is something that can give potential employees an advantage. Learning about rhetorical ecologies and its components is something that everyone should know.

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