

**Finding One's Sound in Others: How a Discourse Community Leads to Individuality**

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As a person progresses in life, they inevitably grow invested in certain interests, and begin to connect with like-minded individuals, either in-person or online. It started when I was seven. My parents, on a whim, bought me a toy guitar. Immediately, I was drawn to how I could make my own music. I was enamoured with the plastic toy to the extent that I signed up for guitar lessons. Eventually though, I felt bored of the guitar; I was following along with my teacher and not playing how I wanted. In the end though, I regained my motivation for guitar after I found my original style, and it was all because I found a guitar discourse community to belong in. A discourse community is a group of people that share the same goals, and communicate with each other in order to achieve those goals (Swales, 2016). As well, it must fulfill eight specific criteria. For the analysis of the guitar-playing discourse community however, I will focus on the criteria of expert members, shared goals, and genres, and how they all link together for a guitarist to find originality in their playing. I will expand on these ideas below.

Still, the guitar community is vast. Different types of guitars, and different musical genres—these are factors that diversify the community. Yet the community I am most involved in is the solo guitar community. Solo guitar is simply playing the guitar without any accompaniment. The acoustic guitar and classical guitar—the ones that people think of when they imagine a campfire—are relatively quiet when compared to most instruments, so their sound is drowned out by other instruments in an ensemble. Because of this, the electric guitar is used when playing with other instruments. However, when playing alone, a guitar with a hollow wooden body is preferred over the electric variant since the acoustic sound allows for more emotional expression in the playing, and therefore a more musical sound. It seems odd that there can be a sense of community in solo guitar. However, playing together is not a necessity for solo guitarists to form a discourse community.

What is necessary, though, is for a community to have “a threshold of members with a suitable degree of relevant content and discorsal expertise” (Swales p.9). In other words, there

must exist individuals that possess a higher level of authority than others. In the case of the guitar-playing community, every individual's skill on the guitar differs from one another, but that alone does not define a threshold to determine authority; there needs to be another metric. Nonetheless, the guitar-playing community can be split into two groups: Those who “create” and those who do not. Creation is not confined to composing a new song. Arranging a cover of an existing song, transposing a piano piece to play on guitar, inventing a new technique—These can all be considered the act of creation. Creation demonstrates a deep understanding of music theory and guitar, but also originality; something that a less experienced guitarist likely does not possess. As such, the ability to create provides a clear indicator as to who is an expert and who is not. The process of passing that indicator is another story.

Another requirement for a discourse community is the existence of a set of goals shared among all members (Swales, 2016). For anybody to improve, an attainable goal must be set. Because of this, the goals of every guitarist differ, depending on their level of expertise in guitar. For a beginner, this might be simply learning chords: a combination of notes that harmonize with one another. A novice could try to play a song they like on guitar by finding sheet music online. Then, as a guitarist gains more experience, they begin to arrange their own covers, and possibly write their own songs, as well. Despite the contrast between these goals, they all revolve around the same idea of expanding one's skill, but what is the best way to hone one's ability?

A person cannot improve without outside influence. In order to refine their guitar prowess, there must be a form of communication among members, namely genres. A genre is a mechanism for “communicative furtherance of its aims” (Swales p. 8). For instance, Meltzer (2020) explains how rap music is an example of a genre, mentioning how it can start social movements. That being said, the guitar community has multiple genres to achieve the community's goals.

A common genre of conveying musical ideas is through guitar tablature. For every line of music, there are six horizontal lines that span the page, representing the six strings of the guitar. Numbers are scribed on top of the lines, denoting which string to pluck and where to place the fingers. It is read from left to right, playing every note in order. If multiple notes are stacked vertically on top of each other, they are meant to be played at the same time. Due to how the guitar is played, tablature is unique to it and its bass variant. With another instrument such as the trumpet, it is not helpful to list fingerings since multiple notes can share the same fingering, which is why writing down notes on a musical staff is better. In the case of the guitar, writing down the fingerings is very simple and straightforward to read, making it the conventional way to convey musical ideas. There can also be additional text on the sheet itself, which gives the guitarist instructions on what exactly to do, such as adjusting the tuning of the strings or playing with a specific volume. Swales (2016) notes that it is rare for a discourse community to “possess” a genre, but in this case, tablature is an example of a genre that only the guitar-playing discourse community possesses.

When playing solo, a guitarist grants themselves complete freedom. Every note and touch occurs at their discretion. Deeper than that, their music is their own. But the influence from others is a fact that cannot be denied. Every guitarist was a beginner. During that point in time, they amass experience from experts in order to achieve their goal of improving their skills. They download tablature created by said experts and practice from it, eventually deriving their own sound. That is my story about how my passion for guitar was reignited by others. As I stride past the threshold of authority, I hope to become the flame that sparks that same fire in others that succeed me.

### References

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