Logan Berry

Brother Grover

ENG 301

3/29/2022

The Discourse Community of the CIT Department

Swales, a linguist specializing in discourse analysis, described discourse communities as “groups that have goals and purposes, and use communication to achieve their goals” (Swales par.4). Almost everyone belongs to one type of discourse community or another. We need to accomplish tasks that are beyond ourselves and because of that, we need to work and communicate with other people. For this paper, I decided to better understand my discourse community in the Computer Information Technology (CIT) department of BYUI. The central web page of the CIT department explains that their goal is to help “students to see the world of opportunity that awaits them. It includes the design, development, and management of systems within an organization to solve real-world problems” (BYUI). I was confused at first about why this was the first statement and goal of the CIT major, but in interviewing my professor, I learned that CIT professors want to prepare their students for a tech world that is constantly changing. Where new tools and new problems will consistently arise. To succeed in their careers, students need to learn how to communicate clearly and effectively with other people in their discourse community. While it is important to understand the terminology of CIT, good communication skills are even more critical to understand the needs of those they are serving and to problem solve the many technical and logistical issues they will need to overcome.

A discourse community’s traits are shaped by its needs and goals. Swales said that each discourse community has “a potentially discoverable set of goals.” (Swales par. 22) The CIT department’s main goal is to prepare its students for the CIT job market. The question they must ask is how to go about teaching and preparing these students. While the professors can teach how to code and use different programs effectively, they are striving to teach us to not only learn the code but become continuous learners and problem solvers. Other academic fields can vary on this, but CIT is a field that is ever-changing, introducing new coding languages, tools, and practices on a near yearly basis. Adaptability is a vital skill that is needed in the future as you will always need to learn and adapt to new technology. The other important skill that even surpasses adaptability is problem-solving. CIT is a field where you will work with code that has many different variables with the little room for error. Hiccups are a daily occurrence. If one is unable to fix and solve the problems that come from code issues, breakdowns in communication, or programs that doesn’t want to install, then they are unfit to be in the CIT field. CIT students must learn to solve problems using both technical and communication skills. In addition to a good understanding of computers and coding, working with others and communicating effectively is an essential skill because being able to see from a different viewpoint is often crucial in solving a CIT problem.

CIT problems aren’t always caused by coding errors. Sometimes they are the result of people’s inability to clearly communicate their requirements. Being able to explain CIT concepts is a normal assignment that is given to CIT students. If there is something that a student doesn’t understand in an assignment, whether their program keeps crashing or they don’t understand the terminology, professors task the students to investigate solutions from the internet and fellow colleagues. After students leave college behind, they will discover that talking with their customers is vital in becoming good problem solvers. Important parts of talking with a customer would be to understand their problems, how it impacts them, and what they have done in the past to fix them. The process of communicating with your team to come up with a solution and sharing your solution with your customer, receiving feedback, and making adjustments based on their inputs is what CIT professors are trying to instill in their students.

A very frequent occurrence in CIT class syllabi is the focus on group assignments. For example, the data warehouse course requires working in groups each week to create a PowerPoint to showcase what we as students have learned. The reasoning is that the assignments “are designed to give you an opportunity to collaborate with others and formulate the most important points from the study materials each week.” Another example of group work would be the Programming Building Blocks course that has the students work in groups to complete team activities. CIT professors have explained that group work is an important focus because basic communication skills are often lacking in both CIT students and professionals. Communication is vital in solving problems that CIT members will face in their careers. This is because they are often working in teams on a project at a company and they will rarely know how to solve every problem by themselves. Most CIT projects involve CIT experts with various specialty skills, including a database administrator, an architect, a programmer, and more. Even if you understand the ins and outs of database design, a CIT professional still needs to communicate effectively with the business department they are serving. If they fail to effectively communicate with their customers, they will most likely need to redo much of their work, which will lead to missed deadlines and unhappy customers.

Discourse communities have different ideas on how to measure success with their work. Swales noted that each discourse community has different “horizons of expectation, defined rhythms of activity, a sense of its history, and value systems for what is good and less good work.” (Swales par. 30) One of the challenges that teachers, teacher assistants, and even fellow students have in communicating within their own discourse community is the large amount of unique lexis. Each program or coding language that CIT students use has an extensive list of acronyms and terms that one must understand and master to be effective. To be a good communicator in the CIT field, one needs to be able to explain the same topic to a variety of people at different skill levels. It is easy to explain a topic to someone who is at a similar skill level, but it is more difficult to explain it to someone with less background knowledge. One example of a teaching strategy is to give examples from real-world scenarios that will resonate more to them than complex computer jargon. Being able to explain a topic to an eight-year-old can be helpful skill in this field. Successful CIT students and professionals are able to explain topics in an accessible manner that everyone can understand clearly. By doing so, they are able to understand problems accurately, get feedback quickly, and avoid losing time and money from the problems that come due to misunderstandings.

To be a good problem-solver, one needs to research solutions to problems. CIT students and professionals need to be able to research instructions and topics on the Internet. When solving problems, the people around you are not the only source of knowledge in solving the task at hand. An effective CIT problem-solver needs to not only to be a good communicator with others, but to also be a skillful user of the internet. Most tests for CIT courses at BYUI are not only open book, but are also open to the internet. The idea behind this is that in the real world, you have two outlets to get information to solve problems: fellow coworkers and numerous articles, guides, and videos on the internet. The additional benefit of learning from the internet is that it allows you to read explanations on CIT concepts and thus be able to learn how to communicate with others via the written word. The CIT Department doesn’t have a class to teach CIT students to correctly write in their field. The next best way to learn these skills is to copy the style of those who communicate well. While it is important to communicate orally in an effective manner, it is also equally important to communicate well in your emails and other messages, whether that be to professors or fellow students.

Often discourse communities have skills that are esteemed highly. The CIT department greatly values the ability to solve problems instead of consistently getting stuck by said problems. Oftentimes, the key to developing problem-solving skills is good communication. Discourse communities come about because of the need to work together as a group to accomplish a goal that would be too difficult for one person. Whether that is the staff of a particular medical hospital, professors of an academic field, or an American football team, each one of these groups needs to work together to achieve their unified goal. For a man to be able to work well with others, he needs to be able to communicate his thoughts, directions, and ideas in a manner that other people can understand. If he is unable to do so, he will struggle in his discourse community and this is especially problematic in the CIT department, where good communication and networks can affect if you sink or float in this field.

Works Cited

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