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The Influence of Discourse Communities on Rhetorical Situations

People, being the social creatures that they are, share information with each other through various forms of communication- art, music, discourse. A specific written/ verbal discourse is governed by what many rhetoricians refer to as a rhetorical situation. As Grant-Davie states in his article “Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents”, rhetorical situations consist of four interlocking pieces - constraints, exigence, audience, and the rhetor - and notes that all the parts are, to an extent, dependent on the latter (265).¹ The other factor on which rhetorical situations are dependent is the unique combination of discourse communities² with which a rhetor is involved. The rhetor’s background is developed through his involvement in multiple discourse communities and the influences from those backgrounds are then expressed by the rhetor within other rhetorical situations. As Harris and Porter note, rhetors belong to multiple discourse communities at any given time, so it follows that the rhetors also act as the bridges for ideas to go between multiple discourses since it is within the rhetor that the various discourse communities meet. Discourse communities (acting in combination on the rhetor) therefore have influence in many areas of the rhetorical situation which collectively serve to influence the progression of a rhetorical situation. In fact, these influences, which the rhetor brings from his respective backgrounds, are the mechanisms for re-interpretation and change in the rhetorical situation. Effectively, discourse communities change rhetorical situations both directly, by providing exigence and constraint, and indirectly, in being promoted by its rhetors influencing other rhetorical situations. It is in understanding the effects of discourse community influence

that we may both better understand and define the components and overall process of a rhetorical situation.

End Notes

¹ Grant-Davie, Keith, "Rhetorical Situations and Their Constituents," *Rhetorical Review*, Vol. 15, No. 2 (Spring, 1997), pp. 264-279

Grant- Davie actually goes through exigence, rhetor, audience, and then constraints in that order, however defining exigence and constraint first helps to provide a better background for the concepts of rhetor and audience.

² Harris, Joseph, "The Idea of Community in the Study of Writing," *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (Feb., 1989), pp. 11-22

The best operational definition for "discourse community" is given by Harris and is explained later on page 4.