Does Coming to College Mean Becoming Someone New?

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As an undergraduate English major, I felt like an outsider. I originally chose to major in English because of my love for reading and writing, but the reading and writing college expected of me was not the reading and writing I was prepared to do. Sure, I could read the assigned literature, and I could make my own good sense of it. Yet that was not enough for my English professors. They wanted me to make their sense of the literature, to understand the texts as they understood them. Not only that, they expected me to write about this alien sense-making in turgid, impersonal, passive voiced prose. When I became an English major, I didn’t just learn certain understandings of what I read; I also had to learn a particular way of reading and writing. Right from the start, it was clear that if I was to become a member of the English-majors community, I had to do more than read and think and write; I had to turn into someone new.

Perhaps that is why I was never a very successful English major and why, eventually, I left the academic world and joined the business community. I was living on the boundary between academic and home communities, between maintaining my identity and accepting another. I found I didn’t like the someone new I was being asked to become.
Eventually, I returned to the academic world and discovered I fit into the community of outsiders known as rhetoricians (people who study the way other people effectively communicate). I'm not sure if I fit into this community because I wanted to join it more than I had wanted to join the English studies community, because it was willing to accept me as I already was, or because I had matured enough to be willing to become someone new. I do know, however, that this second attempt at entrance into the academic community has been as successful as my earlier attempt was a flop.

As a rhetorician and because of my past experience, I have become interested in issues of community membership. Everyone is a member of several discourse communities (the term rhetoricians use to describe groups of people who share patterns and strategies of communication). We're all members of a home discourse community, based on our family's regional, social, and economic lifestyles. And many of us are members of other discourse communities because we are familiar with particular language communities through experience such as jobs and hobbies. But entering the academic discourse communities present on college campuses can produce problems and anxieties for students who are attempting the transition.

In the rest of this essay, I want to use my own experiences and research to answer several questions. What happens as students try to become members of new academic discourse communities? What special writing and thinking abilities are required? What personal investments must be made?

When I was eighteen, my writing was an extremely personal activity. I didn't just throw words on pages. I invested myself into the work. Everything I wrote was full of personal insights, personal style, and voice. A good writer, I was regularly praised and awarded for my high school writing efforts. I was totally unprepared for the shocking comments that my college professors would place on my writing.

Part of the problem came from a natural maturing process: The valued and original insights of a high school senior were suddenly the trite and common repetitions of a college student. And part of the problem came from style. The original, personal, whimsical voice of a young writer was not enough to assure my spot in the academic community.

I have now discovered that rhetoricians have an insightful way of looking at the split I experienced (North 1986). "Formalists," people who think that the most important aspect of a particular discourse community is the forms the community's writers use, would suggest that I didn't know the appropriate forms for academic writing. I didn't know what academic writing sounded like, and I didn't know how to present my ideas in the lingo that would bring the ideas recognition and acceptance. On the other hand, "epistemists," people who think that the most important aspect of a particular discourse community is the way the community thinks and solves problems, would suggest that I was not thinking like members of the academic world are supposed to think. I didn't process my thoughts in appropriate academic ways, according to the epistemists, and I wasn't positively involved with my studies.

Several composition scholars have completed research studies that try to understand more fully what happens with students trying to enter academic discourse communities. Recently, for example, Stephen North (1986) investigated the ways three students changed during one philosophy course. He relied solely on his readings of the papers the students wrote in order to describe three contexts in which the students changed: the rhetorical (the students' sense of their audience and their purpose for writing), the intellectual or epistemic (how the students struggled to understand the ideas they were studying), and the disciplinary or formalistic (how the students used language to show membership in the discourse community). By looking at papers similar to those that I wrote as an undergraduate, North was able to ascertain these three changes in writing for students entering new discourse communities.

Another research project, completed by Lucille McCarthy (1987), studied one student as he learned to negotiate his way through new discourse communities in several different freshman and sophomore courses. McCarthy made several conclusions from her work. First, she found that her subject used the same writing process to figure out how to complete a variety of writing tasks; this would imply that a student who can write in one situation, like I could, can extrapolate a process for writing into other situations. Second, she found that the purpose for the writing task and the student's involvement with the task were important to the writer's success; this implies that students write better if they are actively involved in the topic they are writing about, which is certainly true in my own experience. Finally, McCarthy concluded that writing tasks that are familiar in one situation were considered different when the student encountered them in a different situation; this implies that epistemic knowledge of a discourse community is important for a writer to succeed.

These adaptations writers make to new discourse communities are not limited, of course, to undergraduate college students. Everyone enters new communities throughout life. Carol Berkenkotter, Thomas Huckin, and John Ackerman (1988) verified this when they examined the experiences of a teacher who returned to graduate school after several years of teaching. In their study, they ended up agreeing with both the formalists and the epistemists: They concluded that student writers have to assimilate both the forms and the thoughts of an academic discourse community to function within it. Their subject had to change the nature of his writing, from personal exploration to impersonal declaration, but he also had to change his community allegiance: he had to learn to think like a member of the community.

By looking at these studies and at my experience, then I can begin to make some conclusions about how students have to adapt their writing and thinking to succeed in college's unfamiliar academic discourse community. First, we have to recognize and accept the forms of the community, we have to make our
writing look and sound like that of the field. Second, we have to learn to think in the ways that are valued by the field we are entering; we have to be personal or impersonal, focused on ideas or numbers, as the field demands. Third, we have to have a reliable comfortable writing process that we can take with us from task to task, community to community; once established, the process will probably serve us in a variety of settings. Finally, we have to become personally and intellectually involved with the community, wanting to be a part of it; without personal involvement, the formalistic and epistemic changes are merely window dressing.

As I look back on my own experience, I can clearly identify that last change as the most problematic for me. As an undergraduate English major, I never completed the personal commitment important for my success in the field. Eventually, I learned to mimic the writing and thinking activities that the field valued, but I remained unwilling to submit to the authority of those form and thought patterns. To personally endorse the English studies discourse community I would have had to abandon much of what I believed about life. Later, when I returned to graduate school to study rhetoric, however, I easily endorsed the field, finding it much more palatable to my native ways of being.

As I began my own research into discourse community membership, I was particularly interested in the personal involvement issues. Did other people reject communities, as I had done, because they were hesitant to make the personal commitments necessary for success? Could individuals only join communities that endorsed their native ways of thinking? Or did other people accept the communities and, in the process, give up something of their native ways of being in the world?

To investigate the personal changes students make as they enter new discourse communities, I interviewed, several times over six months, two undergraduates who were taking their first courses toward a degree and eventual licenses in social work.

Stella (the names are changed) was in her early twenties and in college for the second time, having delayed her education for a marriage. As Stella engaged the social work community, she became more accepting of differences in others, developing a new sense of open-mindedness. As she put it, “I try to see people as they are and not make judgments. . . . Through my social work classes, I’ve learned that everybody should be treated that way.” But sometimes this open, nonjudgmental attitude caused problems for Stella who suddenly found that her husband was prejudiced in several ways. “My husband is racially prejudiced, and I’m real open and have no problem with that.” “My husband’s family thinks welfare people are lazy. I really stand up for people they don’t understand.” Through her entrance into the new community, her attitudes toward others changed, and she adopted a socially accepting worldview even when the new worldview was in direct conflict with her family. In the process, she became more committed to the community of social workers.

The other participant in the study, Charlotte, had graduated from high school in 1957. After raising a family and working as both a cosmetologist and a practical nurse, Charlotte was finally returning to college to get the degree she had long cherished. Charlotte, too, was willing to make the personal commitment that membership in the social work community required. As she put it, “The course is really making a difference in my thoughts. I had not recognized that I was biased in my way of thinking.” Further, Charlotte suggested that self-awareness and open-mindedness were mandatory for a social worker; “If you don’t understand yourself, you can’t help anyone else. Not in the way that will help people take control of a situation.” Her studies in social work, she said, changed her overall view of people and communities and culture. And, like Stella, Charlotte tried to become a change agent for those around her: “Just this weekend my husband made a comment, and I said ‘Now just a minute, that’s not the way it is at all.’”

In attempting to enter the social work discourse community, both Stella and Charlotte underwent a great deal of self-realization. Both acknowledged their native social worldviews, critiqued it, began to develop new social worldviews, and even tried to become change agents for their spouses’ worldviews. Through this progression, both women began to develop what their instructor described as the “social work frame of reference,” a socially accepting worldview that is necessary for an individual to help members of diverse social groups try to improve their position in life. In the process, they became increasingly estranged from their home communities.

Research—my own and others’—exploring discourse communities verified my personal experiences taught me. Learning to write within an academically discourse community is not a simple procedure.

First, we have to learn to put down words and ideas in community acceptable ways. We have to internalize and apply the form limitations of the discourse community; our writing has to look like writing in the community is supposed to look. In my own experience, this formalistic community entrance was easy to master, quick to develop; I learned to sound like an English major early in my education.

But there is more. We also have to learn to explore ideas by exploring the intellectual manners that are important to a particular field. We have to accept and use the epistemic process of the discourse community. This can be more difficult than the forms, but new ways of thinking usually develop easily through repeated contact. In my own experience, the epistemic knowledge developed a bit more slowly than the formalistic, but it, too, grew rapidly; I was soon thinking and sounding like an English major.

Finally—and I think most importantly—personal commitment to a particular community is involved in entering that new discourse community. Students can develop the sound of a community and apply the thought process of the community without adopting the worldviews of the community, without truly accepting membership in that community. In my own case, I was unwilling to
become the person the literary studies community required me to be and to
develop the worldview the community expected. As a result, I pursued careers
in two different communities, business and rhetoric. Literary studies expected
me to become somebody new, somebody I was unwilling to become. I was
willing to become a business manager and, later, a rhetorician.

In my research, however, I found that Stella and Charlotte were willing to
make the total transition, to write in social worker ways, to solve problems
using social worker methods, and finally to adopt a social worker worldview,
no matter how alien it was to their native communities. In the process of com-
ing to college, Stella and Charlotte found themselves becoming someone new.

Works Cited
Berkenkotter, Carol, Huckin, Thomas, and John Ackerman (1988). “Conventions,
Conversations, and the Writer: Case Study of a Student in a Rhetoric Ph.D.
Program,” Research in the Teaching of English, 22, 9–44.

Sharing Ideas

• Draw a diagram of your discourse communities.

• I’m very sympathetic to all three stores Kevin shares—his own and those
  of Stella and Charlotte. You’ve probably known people (they may be you)
  who have changed their minds several times about majors and future profes-
  sions. How do these stories illuminate such changes and choices?

• For you, what is at risk when you think about succeeding in your chosen field
  and major? Who agrees or disagrees with your goals and why?
  Consider your family, your significant other, your teacher, your friends?
  How do their opinions affect you?

• What is involved in personally investing in your education?

• How important has writing been to your success in school?

• Kevin claims adaptation to college requires that learners recognize the
  forms of writing used in their new communities, to think in ways that are
  valued in those communities, and to become personally and intellectually
  involved in their communities. How are these three elements playing out
  in your own college life? The lives of your close friends?

Timm’s Tips for
College Writing Success

Nathan Timm

A junior at Florida State University when he composed this essay,
Nathan Timm was studying writing and was an active member of
the university track team.

Every college student has to write. Some love it, others dread it. Welcome to
college. Deal with it. If students want to be able to succeed in college, they
must learn to write well in almost every subject. Writing has become just as
much a part of college as late-night pizza delivery. Still, students always seem
to be complaining about writing papers, even English majors, including avid
writers who are trying to write successfully outside of class. Writers can get so
tangled in their assignments that they think of each assignment as torture
instead of a challenge. Any method found to alleviate this frustration can be a
sanity-saver. To help, I came up with eight helpful hints for writing success-
fully in and out of class in college.

1. Set Measurable Goals

If I didn’t set goals for my writing, I would lose my hair by age twenty-one.
Put your goals in writing. Keep them simple. Write them in your journal. Tape
them to your mirror above your sink. I have Post-it Notes all across my room.
I set goals to get my writing done ahead of time because then I can spend the
remaining extra time concentrating on feedback, comments, and revision.