

# 19 BUILDING ACADEMIC COMMUNITY THROUGH A TOWN HALL FORUM: RHETORICAL THEORIES IN ACTION

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Many faculty members have attempted to forge communities of knowledge and organizational practice in their classrooms that enable students to develop habits of thinking critically and acting like citizens in the wider community and workplace (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997). Likewise, administrators are more frequently being asked to enhance students' experience of the university as "a community of learners" (Boyer Commission, 1998, p. 33) and to foster "student engagement" not only within classrooms, but also within the academic environment in general (Belcheir, 2003). Students also often wish to engage in experiential learning that integrates their academic knowledge and learning processes with social and organizational learning "both on and off campus," and "students want to be in conversation with college presidents and other administrators" (Long, 2002, pp. 9, 11).

These three constituencies have something in common: they can all benefit from the development of an overarching academic community that models in its organizational practices—and therefore most powerfully teaches and influences—civic engagement and responsibility. Indeed, in the vision of the undergraduate student participants of the Wingspread Summit on Student Civic Engagement in 2001, "students should also be viewed as producers of knowledge, not consumers" (Long, 2002, p. 13), and therefore, in order to model community problem-solving methods,

Colleges and universities ... should make a commitment to

finding new ways to foster student voice and incorporate student concerns into discussions and decision-making. If students, faculty, administration, and community partners are able to work together, they will have the potential to successfully address important campus and community issues. (Long, 2002, p. 13)

As Schoem and Hurtado's (2001) edited collection illustrates, various institutions now practice "intergroup dialogue" across academic hierarchies.

However, in many institutions, there are few traditions of collective knowledge-making that transcend the classroom, laboratory, and boardroom within academia—forums that include administrators, teachers and students working together to build and sustain their own community (Tetteh, 2004). The literature on "academic community" rarely considers students as members, and one critical analyst has considered the idea of students belonging to the academic community a conceptual danger (Kogan, 2000). Even publications that promote faculty-student mentorship and inclusion welcome only graduate students (Bennett, 2000, 2003; Hall, 2007). The key question for this chapter, therefore, is how scholarship in rhetoric could aid in the design of an academic community that invites all of its members into reflexive, collective knowledge-making about the values, purposes, and most effective structures and processes of its own organization.

To address this question, this chapter analyzes a town hall forum event initiated by the author in a liberal arts college of a large urban university as a "boundary event" (Wenger, 1998) to allow members of the college—students, faculty, administrators, and staff—to engage in a collaborative process of creating a shared understanding of the challenges facing the college and of engaging in shared knowledge-making about solutions. Drawing on rhetorical theories of exigence, genre, and identification, the chapter begins by situating the town hall analysis in the larger rhetorical exigence for academic community building and then briefly outlines some of the challenges the college faces that gave rise to the town hall event. The chapter then discusses key insights from Wenger's theory of communities of practice, as well as from rhetorical genre theory and from scholarship on town hall events to inform the analysis of the event's planning, the event itself, and the event's outcomes. My purpose here is not to provide a detailed analysis of the issues discussed at the event or even to conduct an in-depth analysis of the discourse that planned and constituted the event. Rather, in line with the purpose of this section of the book, the chapter aims to illustrate how theories of rhetoric and writing can inform the design of collaborative events for shared knowledge making and for facilitating academic community building and change in higher education institutions in ways that reflect their mission of civic engagement.

For this purpose, the chapter is based on Schön's (1995) recommendations for a "scholarship of application" through action research. This form of research involves "the generation of knowledge for, and from, action" by the researchers themselves (Schon, 1995, p. 31). The "practice knowledge—generated in, for, and through a particular situation of action—may be made explicit and put into a form that allows it to be generalized" to similar situations (Schön, 1995, p. 31). Theory can inform practice and help make sense of practice, and writing enables the integration of knowledge gained through cycles of action, reflection, and reflection-in-action. This method proceeds through interpretation and synthesis. It is therefore not subject to common critiques of qualitative methods such as "the plural of anecdote is not data"—such phrases portray the collection of second-hand anecdotes that cannot be verified, as well as claims that individual cases represent larger phenomena. In contrast, this chapter focuses on respected humanistic and social methods. It gathers communally verifiable evidence from direct observation and textual artifacts, and analyzes their features through a method that applies and tests general theories using the particularities of local practice. Informed performance, not universal truth, is the knowledge it aims to produce.

Accordingly, the chapter weaves together ethnographic narratives and thick descriptions of rhetorical practice, theories of written and oral rhetoric, and the analysis of rhetorical artifacts. Knowledge-making methods include rhetorical analysis of organizational documents, auto-ethnographic narratives of events personally experienced by the event organizer, and a macro-level analysis of the written materials produced by the town hall forum. The analysis concludes by discussing the various institutional outcomes of the event.

Far from a heroic tale, the theoretical and analytical elements of this case study provide an assessment of both the strengths and weaknesses of a process in which a deep understanding of written and spoken rhetoric influenced and interpreted a mode of building academic community within a small liberal arts college in a large research university.

## RHETORICAL EXIGENCE FOR ACADEMIC COMMUNITY-BUILDING

Challenges for academic community building vary across higher education institution types, sizes, and locations, but in many of today's large research universities, even the most devoted of teachers, staff, and students can find it difficult to overcome the lines of traditional academic hierarchy that separate them. Academic communities can often work fairly well even in the presence of hierarchy, disciplines, and conflicting ideologies, but only when people practice what

Bennett (2000) refers to as genuine “hospitality,” which “involves welcoming the other through openness in both sharing and receiving claims of knowledge and insight” (p. 92) can they engage in shared knowledge making.

As theorized by Bennett (2003), academic community is an ideal that is difficult to achieve in practice because of the “insistent individualism,” “unilateral one-way power,” and even the “simple fatigue” often experienced by all parties in academic contexts (pp. 53, 59). “Insistent individualism” is Bennett’s term for a phenomenon in which people take advantage of a university’s inherent divisions of labor, status, and knowledge in order to build empires of status, fame and power out of academic programs and individual careers. Bennett believes that “insistent individualism” is fostered in Western society in general, but may be heightened by academic culture because of the structures of reward for individualistic accomplishments. However, it can be overcome by introducing academic events and communication processes that enhance “relationality, hospitality, and conversation” (Bennett, 2003, p. 52).

Such practices of hospitality, collegiality, and collegial governance that soften academic hierarchies must be renewed as reigning ideologies shift regarding what makes a university a successful organization. Universities adopting a business approach focused on markets, efficiency, and division of labor can impose additional divisions between administrators, teachers, staff, and students as they are increasingly viewed (and more often view themselves) as managers, employees, and customers with economically-defined functions and identities (Bogue, 2006; Washburn, 2005). The business model is quite different from the educational model developed by the Boyer Commission (1998), which portrays the university as an “ecosystem” consisting of interdependent members of a multi-generational learning community (p. 9).

The institutional challenges described here, especially when they are brought on by gradual changes, do not necessarily lead to rhetorical action that addresses them. People need to be made aware that challenges create opportunities for beneficial communication. Rhetorical theorists like Bitzer (1968) have taught us that every rhetorical act starts with an “exigence,” which is a need or a call from the “rhetorical situation” that makes a certain act of communication necessary or desirable. A communication strategy without an understanding of its exigence is bound to fail because speakers will not understand their rhetorical purposes and opportunities. An exigence, such as a perceived crisis in an academic community, also makes it possible to evaluate whether a rhetorical act has appropriately responded to the exigence and satisfied the needs of the communities and their audiences.

Other theorists provide further insight into how exigence can be crafted, not just discovered, in organizations. Vatz (1973) reversed Bitzer’s causal relationship between exigence and act. He argued that rhetoric is not merely a response to an

obvious situational exigence, but rhetoric itself creates exigence by giving certain features of a situation rhetorical “salience” or relevance to an act of communication. Because of this recursive and cyclical relationship, rhetorical situations are not objectively measurable and separable from rhetorical acts. Exigencies are also selectively perceived and justified. Therefore, collectively understanding and agreeing upon one’s exigence is also a process involving interpretation and persuasion. In situations where a crisis is not obvious because communication has declined gradually over time, it is often necessary to take Vatz’s approach and raise awareness of a need to communicate with one another.

However, once a community identifies an exigence for community-building rhetoric, it needs a healthy awareness of the complex nature of communities. Academic and non-academic “communities” are not idealized, homogeneous, harmonious collectives, but rather, the various identities, hierarchies and divisions within their own boundaries make it extremely difficult to engage in the ethical construction of a shared set of beliefs and values. Even the act of articulating a community boundary of who belongs and who does not is an act of persuasion that includes some and painfully excludes others. Faculty and students participating in a community discussion take real personal risks that may result in their own exclusion or loss of reputation, so the dialogue often involves the performance of existing hierarchies as an act of survival.

Rhetoric and writing scholars Ornatowski and Bekins (2004) caution that “community building” writing and speech used by particular people in strategic situations always involves selectively articulating various beliefs and values while excluding others. They demystify the notion that nonacademic non-profit or public communities are by definition any more virtuous, “civic,” or harmonious than business and academic communities. As Burke (1970) might have cautioned, community can easily become a “god-term,” a totalizing word used to organize all desirable knowledge and to typify all that is virtuous about rhetorical practice, and it can become an expression of an ideal or natural order which followers must obey.

However, whether community is imagined as a static ideal or a democratic process, it is constituted through continual negotiation and reinforcement of its purposes, boundaries, and roles—largely through rhetoric. Burke (1969) has aptly theorized that rhetoric is as much about creating divisions between people as it is about creating identification between people. He explains why and how a process of “division” occurs through communication. “In pure identification there would be no strife,” he explains.

But put identification and division ambiguously together, so that you cannot know for certain just where one ends and the

other begins, and you have the characteristic invitation to rhetoric.... When two men collaborate in an enterprise to which they contribute different kinds of services and from which they derive different amounts and kinds of profit, who is to say, once and for all, just where ‘cooperation’ ends and one partner’s ‘exploitation’ of the other begins? (Burke, 1969, p. 25)

In the college, where did students’, administrators’, and faculty members’ “cooperation” begin and end, and what practices defined mere economic or academic “exploitation” of one another? Uncertainty about the borders and ethical practices of a community create an exigence, an “invitation to rhetoric.” Identification and division will be shown at work below in the analysis of challenges facing the college.

### SPECIFIC CHALLENGES FACING THE COLLEGE

The college that was the site of rhetorical action described in this chapter is veiled in order to emphasize the communication process and to protect the institutions and people involved. At the time of the events described here, the large research university in a major North American city had a student enrollment of over 20,000, 2,000 of which—full and part-time undergraduate and graduate students—were enrolled in a small liberal arts college.

The college’s town hall event originated with discussions of what the event organizer and other members of the academic community perceived to be their challenges. Reduced government funding of postsecondary education, resulting budget cuts within the university at large, and the increased pace of the growth of the city and its demand for increased access to postsecondary education, had conspired to increase everyone’s workload by increasing the faculty-student ratio. All units in the university were told to generate their own revenue, and liberal arts faculties found this more difficult to do than professional faculties. Fears regarding whose program would be shut down or cease growth in full-time faculty numbers due to insufficient resources weakened academic morale and made it difficult for everyone to practice open, trusting communication across levels of hierarchy. A general sense of cynicism and frustration arose about the academic planning process as individual administrators, students, and faculty were struggling with a high workload, tight budgets, high tuition, social and workplace isolation and competition, all of which weakened the community, making it less capable of dealing effectively with crises and changes.

Liberal arts programs in general, especially in research universities, often struggle to find appropriate rhetorical strategies to articulate their value to

students, each other, and the public. Faculty members often regard with ambivalence the relationship between their perceived academic roles on the one hand and marketplace and student demands on the other hand (Axelrod, 2003; Nelsen, 2002; Pocklington & Tupper, 2002). Faculty feel concerned about

shifting the balance between ... the technologically and professionally-oriented disciplines and the more academically oriented disciplines; undermining the sharing of knowledge, and the responsibility of academic researchers to adopt independent and critical stances; and displacing collegialism in favor of corporate-managerial practices of decision making. (Newson, 2000, p. 188)

Exemplifying this phenomenon, faculty members at this college had developed a culture that resisted consumerist or industry-driven approaches to education. They desired to distinguish their university programs from programs offered at community colleges or technical institutes, and they did so by emphasizing research, theory, and critical skills.

The students in the college, however, had a different concern about their college community. In classroom discussions about the identity and purpose of majors, students reported that their families and friends often asked them what they were studying, and they found it hard to articulate the scope, focus, and market value of their program. Liberal arts students were being ridiculed by peers and employers for their choice of a major that was often perceived as inferior to professional programs in nursing, business, engineering, or social work. The tension was especially acute for communication majors because “communication” had been frequently ridiculed in the media as a worthless degree. In addition to numerous derogatory jokes spread through the Internet, in an episode of *The Simpsons*, for example, a football player is ridiculed for having a communication degree and he confesses it is a “phony major” in which he learned nothing (Mula & Kruse, 1999).

A brief analysis of the communication program’s Web site revealed how the faculty’s public communication may have exacerbated the division between faculty, student, and society expectations for a communication degree. Under the heading “What is Communication?” their page proclaimed

Communication is a broad interdisciplinary field that encompasses both social sciences and humanities perspectives on communication. At [university name], a BA degree in communication is a liberal arts degree that gives students the option

of taking a generalist approach, or concentrating in media or rhetoric and discourse.

This opening used the academic language of faculty members to articulate a field and its intellectual breadth. It seemed to be written by and for academics as a marker of disciplinary territory and philosophy. For students and the public, the opening did not attempt to define “interdisciplinarity,” describe “social sciences and humanities perspectives on communication,” name the studies denoted by the term “liberal arts,” or explain the market value of either a “generalist approach” or concentrations named by the undefined terms “rhetoric and discourse.”

The next section under the heading “Is this a Professional Degree?” articulated the communication program’s resistance to perceived demands from students for practical job training:

It is not intended to be a professional degree, so you will not receive specialized training in media production broadcasting, journalism, film, etc., nor training beyond an introductory level in public relations or organizational communication. While not specifically a professional program, it will help prepare students for careers in both print and electronic journalism, public relations, as well as in business, politics and other related fields. The courses you will take emphasize a critical perspective on communication as a cultural process.

This Web site explained neither how “a critical perspective on communication as a cultural process” ... “will help prepare students for careers” named, nor why this goal would be important to the college and its students. A later section titled “Help with Finding a Job” vaguely claimed that “the breadth of knowledge that a Communication Studies degree represents may improve your flexibility and long-term career prospects.” The Web site stated (now in everyday language, clearly addressing students) that it was the students’ job, not the college’s, to supplement the program with job skills training through highly skilled volunteer positions, enrolling in the co-op program, or taking additional practical degrees, certificates or workshops. Thus the program distanced itself from students’ and society’s views of the practicality of a postsecondary degree.

As this necessarily brief sketch of the college’s challenges indicates, the situation of the college called for a rhetoric that would overcome the divisions expressed in the communication program’s document. The written articulation of this divide made it difficult for scholars, teachers, students, and the general pub-



lic to understand their common ground and interdependence, an understanding which is essential to a healthy academic community. The college needed to discover, in Burkean (1969) terms, that neither were students merely “exploited” for their tuition, nor were students the marketplace merely “exploiting” academics for certification. This process required learning how to use discourse to identify with each other as a community.

## DESIGNING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE FOR ACADEMIA

For guidance to the process of analyzing and designing communication that enables academic community building, I turned to Wenger’s (1998) theories of “communities of practice” (CoP) and “learning communities” as they can inform how shared communication and engagement constitute communities within academia, and how these communities can be designed in real institutions to structure and enable learning. The town hall forum in the college can be seen as an exploration of the feasibility and relevance of this model of community-building within academic institutions.

Appropriate to the vision of universities, Wenger’s (1998) concept of CoPs portrays them as “a locus for the acquisition of knowledge” as well as “for the creation of knowledge” (p. 214). CoPs are valuable for universities because effective knowledge-making abilities and roles for students, teachers, and researchers are acquired most efficiently and deeply when novices and experts are embedded in a real social context that makes their communication meaningful. Learners develop their roles and communication together through apprenticeship and coaching within a mixed community of expert practitioners, marginal and peripheral members who form the community of practice.

However, according to Wenger (1998), an institutional unit such as a classroom (or a college within a university) is not necessarily a community of practice: “It may consist of multiple communities of practice, or it may not have developed enough of a practice of its own” (p. 119). CoPs may also be unrealized: they may be only “potential” among people who share a form of association, or they may be “latent” among people who have had a past association (Wenger, 1998, p. 228). Wenger continually states that CoPs—the realized, active communities that enable organizational action and learning—are defined by three features: 1) a joint enterprise, 2) mutual engagement that increases social bonds, and 3) a shared repertoire of behaviors and communication strategies.

Although Wenger (1998) claims “learning cannot be designed” because learning happens with or without design, he emphasizes that “there are few more

urgent tasks than to design social infrastructures that foster learning” (p. 225). Whether pursued consciously or subconsciously, learning is inevitable within a CoP, and designs can help to foster these communities.

The building of a college-wide community that bridges or overlaps several communities of practice, even temporarily, can be facilitated through what Wenger (1998) calls a “boundary encounter,” a communication event whereby a “broker,” an individual member of multiple communities, enables people to travel across boundaries into each other’s communities. One powerful form of a boundary encounter is a “delegation” event, which involves a number of participants from separate but related communities who come together to negotiate meaning. A boundary encounter can be a discrete event, or it can evolve into a “boundary practice”:

If a boundary encounter—especially of the delegation variety—becomes established and provides an ongoing forum for mutual engagement, then a practice is likely to start emerging. Its enterprise is to deal with boundaries and sustain a connection between a number of practices by addressing conflicts, reconciling perspectives, and finding resolutions. The resulting boundary practice becomes a form of collective brokering. (Wenger, 1998, p. 114)

These boundary encounters can eventually lead to the formation of CoPs. The town hall event to be analyzed here can be seen as an attempt at coordinating a “delegation” type of boundary encounter through which a community of practice could emerge.

To create the kind of boundary encounter theorized by Wenger (1998), its design must “create channels of communication among practices” and “coordinate multiple kinds of knowledgeability” (p. 247). A boundary encounter is a new genre of communication, or collection of genres, that mediates and coordinates communities and their multiple forms of knowledge. Theories of genre therefore play an important role in guiding the design of such a boundary event.

## RHETORICAL GENRE THEORY FOR ACADEMIC EVENT DESIGN

Rhetorical genre theory explains how genres of communication reflect and constitute a community. Genres of communication, such as “journal article,” “faculty meeting,” and “town hall” are not defined by their internal linguistic

form and structure (such as the headings and style of a scholarly book chapter), but, rather, by the social actions and communal contexts that make them meaningful (Miller, 1984).

As Miller theorized in her seminal 1984 article “Genre as Social Action,” a genre is embedded in and constituted by social action. Genres are solidified through repeated use until they gradually become known as a typified response to a rhetorical exigence. When audiences are familiar with genres, they approach them with expectations about the types of communication that will occur in them, and they also tend to take on the identities and roles that writers, speakers or audiences usually play in such genres. Miller and other genre theorists (Artemeva, 2005; Ervin, 2006) acknowledge Vatz’ (1973) critique and modification of Bitzer (1968): genres and their rhetoric are not just a product of social action, but rhetors can use existing genres, or construct new hybrid genres, to actively construct or maintain rhetorical situations and exigence.

According to a rhetorical understanding of genre, genres of communication that arise in organizations (such as an academic unit within a research university) accomplish the mutual goals of people in the organization. Rhetorical genre theorists have taught that the systems of activity determine the form and content of a “repertoire” of written and oral genres, and that these genres in turn shape the kinds of activity occurring through them. Orlikowsky and Yates (1994) explain that “A community’s genre repertoire indicates its established communicative practices. Hence, the concept of genre repertoire can serve as a useful analytic tool for investigating the structuring of a community’s communicative practices over time” (p. 546).

Genre change is linked to organizational change. Communities and genres are intertwined, and as the community changes, so do its genres. As Bazerman (2003) writes, “the emergence of genre is intricately bound with changing professional roles and relations, changing institutions, the emergence of professional norms and professional identities, ideology, epistemology, ontology, and psychology” (p. 7). New genres can enter existing repertoires and alter people’s ways of thinking and understanding their identities and communities. New genres are necessary to facilitate new forms of collaborative activity between multiple activity systems or CoPs, such as those of students, administrators, and faculty members. This enables us to see the role of rhetorical action in transforming an institution.

However, genres are also about communication habits and regularities that resist change. When people face a new communication situation, they will tend to look for familiar generic patterns. Genres reify, or make concrete, a community’s abstract values, activities, and knowledge. If one wishes to create new communities that bridge existing ones, one cannot simply adjust the content and style of the communication genres currently in use in each. Yet because genres

evoke familiar behaviors, a completely unfamiliar genre, or a genre viewed to be inappropriate to social action, may fail to be understood.

In the case of universities, the three primary goals or social actions are teaching, research, and service (to institution and community). However, if these activities and roles within an institution are functionally separated by institutional boundaries with their own leaders, they may each have separate generic repertoires. Thus, some genres may arise around teaching practices, others around research, and others around university or community service. Yet faculty members and administrators need to have the genre knowledge to communicate in all three of these sets of repertoires, and universities' internal cohesion and educational effectiveness will benefit by inviting students to participate productively in each. Social actions need to be coordinated across members of all three domains, and there are few genres that enable this cross-domain interaction.

Community brokers must therefore be very careful in choosing, modifying, and portraying new, boundary-spanning genres of communication, especially in the beginning phases of facilitating communication across institutional boundaries. As research reviewed by Orlikowski and Yates (1994) suggests, "at the formation of a new community, members may import norms from other communities in which they have participated" (p. 548). In this case study, the import was the genre of the town hall.

## THE POTENTIAL OF THE TOWN HALL GENRE

Scholars have traced the history of the town hall to the meetings of the colonial-era United States, where deliberations and debates would be held in a town's central hall. The town hall is commonly discussed in the context of a variety of genres that promote "participatory democracy" (Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2004, pp. 315-316). Participatory democracy is "talk-centric" rather than "voting-centric," and "focuses on the communicative processes of opinion and will formation that precede voting" (Chambers, 2003, p. 308). Delli Carpini and colleagues (2004) also note that experimental research "has found that face-to-face communication is the single greatest factor in increasing the likelihood of cooperation" (p. 324). In this way, a town hall could help participants aim for Burkean (1969) rhetorical identification and Bennett's (2000) academic hospitality, especially in light of the Web site communication that had demonstrated division.

The benefits of the town hall's local, inclusive, slow, multi-directional communication over quick, one-way communication are reflected in an 1881

speech given by Whitelaw Reid at a town hall in Xenia, Ohio. He argued that it should be the forum for political discourse “in the community, from the community, and about the immediate concerns of the community. It should stimulate what we may call a real municipal life” (Reid, 1881, pp. 25-26). The slow and difficult exercise of face to face deliberation on local issues such as morality, taxation and education, in contrast with the short-cut to debate in the print newspapers, would help a community achieve the benefits of democracy. The process of the town hall, therefore, had a practical educational value. According to Reid, benefits of the town hall discourse would include not just wiser decisions but “broader views of life and duty; a recognition of the fact that something can often be said on the other side; a wider toleration than is always common in rural communities, of what other people think, and of their right to think it, in politics, education, temperance or religion” (pp. 27-28). In a similar vein, Mendelberg (2002) explains that “if it is appropriately empathetic, egalitarian, open-minded, and reason-centered, deliberation is expected to produce a variety of positive democratic outcomes,” such as tolerance for diverse views, the ability to justify one’s views, and the tendency to give up adversarial approaches and embrace interdependence (p. 153).

However, the town hall genre has not always lived up to its ideals. Lukensmeyer and Brigham (2002), for example, argue that as they have been recently used in American political culture, town halls have been ineffective.

Public hearings and typical town hall meetings are not a meaningful way for citizens to engage in governance and to have an impact on decision making. They are speaker-focused, with experts simply delivering information or responding to questions. Little learning occurs, for citizens or decision makers, because airing individual concerns too often devolves into repetitive ax grinding, grandstanding, or even a shouting match between various stakeholders. In the end, decision makers don’t know which points of view have the most salience for various groups because there has been no authentic, informed exchange of opinion and no opportunity to build a true consensus. (Lukensmeyer & Brigham, 2002, pp. 351-352)

Surely, then, as an imported genre, the town hall inherited valuable ideals of democratic deliberation from its past, but also required customization to the situation at hand, which was important to address in the planning of the event.

## ANALYSIS OF EVENT PLANNING COMMUNICATION

The idea for an event first came about as I, then an untenured communication professor, conversed with a senior professor about the divisions and miscommunication between faculty and students. In a collective e-mail to our college administrators, we both suggested some ideas for increasing constructive dialogue with students. While they resisted the initiation of any additional formal committee or ombudsperson, they approved our suggestion to hold an informal “faculty and student brainstorming session” about how to meet some of the challenges that our college community faced in its academic programs.

Since I was not a member of all three communities, the event needed to be collaboratively planned and executed by a loosely defined planning committee. When the administrator of student affairs offered her assistance and support, I gradually gathered a planning team of about eight students and another faculty member. Communicating about the institutional and program-specific challenges outlined above as the exigence or invitation to a rhetoric of identification, we set about co-constructing a new event through which students, staff, teachers, and administrators could talk constructively about the issues related to the identity and goals of their programs. We went about planning for the event in a cautious, gradual fashion, initiating a planning process six months prior to the event. Given everyone’s workload, effective planning required time.

Collaborative writing, revision, and the use of both online and print communication were essential to the process of planning and communicating about the event. To make the planning process open to all who were interested, the university’s online course management system facilitated planners’ discussions and welcomed others into the dialogue who could not meet with us face-to-face. This is where a written outline of the meeting was distributed to the planning committee, and decisions were made regarding which planners would become event volunteers, panelists, or fill other roles. By the close of the actual event, this online forum had 29 members and 17 messages, and 10 people were active in attending face-to-face planning meetings. The messages functioned less often as a live discussion and more often as a location for posting updated written information about the event. Planning meetings and follow up e-mail among meeting participants were the primary genres of communication. The fact that oral discussion was preferred by planners despite their busy schedules demonstrates the value of physical, oral forums for “mutual engagement” when designing an event for the purpose of facilitating a CoP.

The involvement of administrators also brought legitimacy to our event and reassured both administrators and other participants that it would not be coun-

terproductive. Members of the planning group met face-to-face with our dean and associate dean the month before the event to finalize the meeting's context, purpose, methods, and advertising strategy. In support of the forum, the associate dean arranged for the room and sponsored some light refreshments for the event. The college's main offices were to be closed during the event in order to enable administrative support staff members to participate, reflecting the value we placed on their participation as members of our college community. The dean also spoke as one of several panelists, and even invited to the event a consultant to the senior administration who was conducting a study of the potential restructuring of the liberal arts college. Involvement of all members of our academic community was essential to make this a community-building event.

As Wenger (1998) cautions, vital community engagement is "bounded" by "physiological limits" (p. 175) since we can only be in one place at a time, we can only handle so much complexity, and it takes physical and mental energy for direct, sustained relational engagement with people. As a 1994 report issued by the American Association of University Professors showed, faculty work on average between 48 and 52 hours per week, and college faculty members were indeed very busy (AAUP, 1994). However, full-time faculty were invested in the academic community and had already established relationships of engagement, so that they were more likely to participate than students. In contrast, students normally engaged with only one faculty member at a time within the context of scheduled classes that were already quite demanding of their energy. Outside of class time, most students in the university engaged in paid work to afford tuition and the cost of living in the city. Moreover, according to the university's institution-wide student surveys, approximately 50% of students spent 6-15 hours a week commuting between campus, home, and work because of a lack of affordable student housing on and near campus. Unsurprisingly, students spent little time on campus outside of attending classes: few were involved in extracurricular activities, approximately 50% of students reporting 0-1 hour per week in co-curricular activities and 30% reporting 1-5 hours per week. Attending an extracurricular event such as this, although short, would be costly of time and energy for faculty members, but even more so for students. Communication design had to take account of participants' limited resources for engagement and would have to involve carefully crafted and audience-targeted persuasion.

Early in the planning process, the faculty and student "brainstorming session" was therefore renamed a "town hall." It was hoped that this genre would raise expectations of an event of political weight and seriousness, thereby invoking in participants an identity of responsible citizens who should gather to discuss the issues we faced. I added the term "forum" as well, calling it a "town

hall forum” because a “forum” was a more broadly known term in our culture for an open, public discussion and would at least give a hint to those who were unfamiliar with town halls.

However, student participation was challenging because of the failure of a previous “town hall” event on campus. A university-wide town hall to discuss the university’s budget, hosted by the Student’s Union and delivered by the university’s senior administration, was advertised by e-mail to every student at the university. As the student newspaper reported, it was finally cancelled due to “virtually zero attendance.”

The town hall genre was quite different from the traditional genres through which student voices were channeled at the college. Student communication was usually both called forth and controlled by the mediation of genres used by administrators or teachers (a course evaluation form, a student satisfaction survey, an assignment, an exam, or an appeal hearing). These are genres through which students are evaluated by those who have more power than they, or in which students are used as research subjects to evaluate their courses and teachers. The teacher-student power relationship within a course context can constrain student communication so that when students freely express a legitimate concern or problem outside of these formal channels, or even offer a helpful suggestion, students know it may easily sound like a threat or a complaint against the instructor, rather than as an opportunity for student and instructor to work together to improve future courses or the program as a whole.

Therefore, educating students about the purpose and potential effectiveness of the forum was crucial. The exigence for this event had to be discerned by its audiences as something more than a reaction to student apathy, a negative appeal that would put students on the defensive and make them more aware of their reasons for non-communication. It had to be worth their time and effort, more than an administrative feel-good talk that would inform us of policies made by others. The event also had to be guarded against devolving into the opposite, such as a corporate pep talk, for instance, a venting session, or a heated argument that would just make divisions worse. It clearly had to hold out an opportunity to break down the negativity and misunderstandings articulated by Bennett (2000) and to enact the forms of academic hospitality that he theorized.

In our event advertisements our planning team tried to articulate the event’s purposes so that the community could better understand this unfamiliar genre. The social meaning of the event was needed to justify drawing people into a new way of communicating with each other. Our advertisement for the event began with the statement “*We all know our college is facing serious challenges. Now let’s discuss solutions.*” This advertisement thus activated the resources of Burkean “identification.” It enabled each person to imagine whichever challenges they



felt were most important to our faculty, rather than having us articulate those challenges in advance, and it raised curiosity. Through the use of “our” and “we,” we hoped to create a sense of identification with the college’s interests.

To help provide a little more focus after the vague opening statement, three main questions were posed on the advertisement: “What is our college all about?” “How do we build more value into our work, our courses, research, programs, and degrees?” and “What should we save and protect for the future?” These questions, which we drafted and revised together in our planning meetings, provided a structure, topic, and purpose for the communication that occurred at the meeting, making the event not merely a matter of one-way information dissemination but of the negotiation of meaning and of community boundaries.

In order to ensure that the invitation was well adapted to an audience of faculty and students, the president of the undergraduate communication students’ club and I worked together to draft and distribute the e-mail invitations to faculty and to students. The week before the meeting, I finalized and posted our event advertisement posters on walls and sent e-mail reminders to planners and those who said they intended to attend. The personal reminders through the familiar channels of e-mail gave people a sense that their individual contributions were strongly desired and that they would meet with people they already knew personally.

## ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION DURING THE EVENT

The event had 33 participants of which 18 were students, which means that only a small fraction of all our college’s students attended. However, half of the participants were staff and faculty members. Approximately 25% of our full-time faculty and nonacademic staff were present, and this included a significant portion of our administrators, including the dean, two associate deans, a division head, and three program coordinators. The range of participants was reflective of the “delegation” boundary encounter described by Wenger (1998).

The overall plan of the meeting (described more fully below) was to open with a general introduction of purpose and plan, and then to proceed through four stages of structured written and oral discourse activity (several panelist speeches, large group discussion, small group discussion with note-takers, and a collaborative free-writing activity). Each of these stages engaged the participants more actively than the stage before it: first they participated as listeners to the panelists, then as a large group of idea contributors, then as small group problem-solving participants, and then as individual writers and readers of suggestions and thanks.

To open the meeting, I addressed the issue of genre expectations by comparing the town hall to familiar genres and articulating rhetorical purposes: the meeting was not an official decision-making meeting like the bimonthly college council, but it still had important purposes and outcomes: to inform each other of what is going on in different areas of the faculty, to understand each other's unique perspectives, and to generate productive ideas. In accordance with the communication ethics of our community, I informed the participants at the outset that event planners were volunteering to take notes during the event and we were going to compile a report and distribute it to the faculty members and those who provided their e-mail addresses. We then explained the anonymity and confidentiality protections and clarified that participants who did not feel comfortable with our process could choose to avoid participating in ways they did not wish.

After the general introduction, four panelists—the dean, a staff member, an instructor and a student—gave brief speeches about how they perceived the strengths and challenges of our faculty. This representative panel sent the message that people of all levels of status and hierarchy were authorized to have a voice at this meeting.

We then moved to a large-group discussion facilitated by an instructor, during which we wrote on the chalkboard the major issues that participants had noted in the panelists' talks and the participants were able to suggest their own issues. This exercise ensured that we gained an understanding of each other's interpretation of our rhetorical situation and exigency, and that we as the event planners and panelists were not merely imposing our own ideas. The exigencies that people reported were largely those discussed in the opening sections of this article: organizational hierarchy and division, the language used to explain the program, and the perceived and real market value and social value of liberal arts degrees. Students also spoke of the need to learn more about global cultures and issues of globalization.

Then, as the third step, we organized these issues into four general topic areas and broke the participants into four smaller groups to analyze the problems further and brainstorm solutions to the issues. In line with the purpose of the event as a boundary encounter, we ensured each small group had a diverse composition of administrators, teachers, students, and nonacademic staff. Volunteer student note-takers (members of the planning committee and students I knew personally) accompanied each group to record ideas as well as participate. This note-taking practice ensured that students' perspectives and vocabulary were involved in the authoritative act of translating oral to written communication.

After the groups had some time to discuss, we facilitated a collaborative writing and reading activity called "inkshedding" (described below), a practice developed by Reither and Hunt (Hunt, 2004), which involves informal writing in

response to an issue or a presentation as well as reading and possibly commenting on the responses of other participants (for a detailed explanation and study of inkshedding, see Horne, this volume). This final activity was chosen because it ensured that each person was given the opportunity to contribute a written, articulated message. Oral discussion is often dominated by the most outspoken or powerful persons, and feasible suggestions and well-reasoned comments are more often a product of written reflection. Inserting written communication in an oral forum would guard against the negative features of town halls noted by Lukensmeyer and Brigham (2002). It would also ensure that undergraduate students also had a written voice as co-producers of institutional knowledge alongside faculty and administrators, as the Wingspread conference participants desired (Long, 2002).

The inkshedding activity engaged the full resources of rhetoric, not only written language: it engaged spatial, aural and physical communion, like a dance without music, orchestrated in respectful communal silence. It created institutional time and space for participants to contribute their written ideas without specific questions or prompts other than those provided by the event itself. When each participant finished their own piece of writing, they left it on the desk, got up and found another piece of paper with someone else's comments. While they read another person's inkshed, they could underline what they thought was important, and they could add comments of their own if they agreed or disagreed. Most participants had never experienced inkshedding before, but when the time came to get up to read and comment on other people's thoughts, they found it quite exciting. Participants could be observed looking for another inkshed they had not read yet, and mild interjections and quiet laughter could be heard from readers. Finally they were able to return to look at their own inkshed and see what others had written on it.

At the end of the meeting, participants submitted their inkshedding papers to the event organizers. These documents helped provide direct, anonymous quotations of participants for the event report.

## ANALYSIS OF EVENT OUTCOMES

A few weeks after the event, the event report was distributed to over 50 individuals by e-mail, including to the event participants, as well as to additional people involved in the planning phases and to several people who were unable to attend, but had expressed an interest in the event.

Through the report, the event was able to influence institutional change, not just generate mutual understanding among participants. As a result, the

town hall became part of the college's history, open to criticism and praise, and available for quotation in planning documents. It reified the experience of participants and made their shared knowledge and knowledge-making process accessible to others as an institutional object. According to Wenger (1998), reification "shapes our experience .... by focusing our attention in a particular way and enabling new kinds of understanding" (pp. 59-60).

The event was very successful according to the written and oral responses of participants and the outcomes described below. Although the student attendance was small, the success should be measured in light of the challenges facing our initiative. Our event, for example, was able to draw more students than the Student's Union's university-wide town hall forum four months earlier.

By permitting the open discussion of topics of mutual concern, participating students were able to articulate their own vision of liberal education that seemed to respond to the divisions revealed in our communication Web site. Although it was not a theme or topic forced upon the discussion, our town hall enabled our faculty to better understand students' desires for experiential learning opportunities, such as community service learning and co-op learning, so that their desire was no longer imagined as mere careerism opposed to the theoretical and humanistic aims of our educational programs. Participants began to understand that both aims and value sets could overlap and coexist, or at least be communicated by way of respectful contrast as a necessary complement to one another.

By discussing how we as instructors could balance and combine these values, we developed our collective capacity to construct and provide experiential learning opportunities—we came away with practical ideas and now had some idea of how to draw on the creative energy of our students to achieve our common educational goals. This communication enabled the articulation of our common ground and fed the imagination of an academic community that crossed boundaries.

In addition to these more conceptual outcomes, the town hall resulted in some tangible decisions and new structures designed to continue the kinds of boundary practices the town hall forum was meant to encourage.

In a college meeting one week later, faculty members and administrators raised specific recommendations and proposals that they explicitly said were influenced by the town hall dialogue. The program head for communication brought forward a proposal for a new course in experiential learning, which was eventually accepted into the curriculum. An associate dean proposed a revision of the list of courses in the "world areas," citing what students had said about the internationalization of their education.

In addition, the event's focus on experiential learning catalyzed the creation of our college's community service learning (CSL) committee the following

summer. Prior to the committee's formation, the college had been unaware that its community-based learning activities were part of the larger CSL movement in North America. Many instructors were happily surprised to discover that their peers in other programs of study were also involved in service-learning.

The following year the CSL committee held a forum among several of the college's community partners, students, faculty and administrators and subsequently circulated an event report to participants. The report was voluntarily compiled by an undergraduate student who was also writing an honors thesis on service-learning experiences of students in the college. The committee's co-chairs and members continued to actively support and promote CSL in the college and university at large through supporting CSL grant-writing and research, mentoring CSL instructors and students, and creating a new CSL course (separate from the experiential learning course mentioned above).

In addition to these new initiatives, the outcomes also included a new position. The dean soon appointed another instructor to a new part-time senior administrative position in the college that was specifically designed to bridge administrative and student communities and enhance co-curricular engagement among students.

In the same community-bridging spirit, the articulation of the divisions between faculty and students enabled the co-design of an innovative program to foster mutual engagement between faculty and students. A new senior-level practicum course on peer mentoring and collaborative learning educated student leaders who collaborated with participating instructors to serve as peer mentors to the students taking their courses. Over the years, this boundary practice developed into a CoP that was institutionalized through curriculum and funding. Teachers' and students' relationships became more like the model of hospitable community outlined by Bennett (2000).

Finally, the event also had implications for my organizational identity as a rhetoric and writing studies scholar, which I felt expanded in unexpected ways. Besides co-chairing a service-learning committee and developing a new boundary practice, I was also invited to participate in a few university-wide task forces and committees. I was also better able to argue for the value of rhetorical studies to the college when it was threatened.

However, much community-building work remained to be done after this experimental "boundary encounter." While it gave birth to curricular and administrative changes and a new community of practice, the town hall itself did not lead to a CoP. The town hall event was not repeated because of the collective time and effort involved and because the rhetorical situation changed.

This set of outcomes, while disappointing in some ways, is consistent with Wenger's (1998) portrayal of the experimental and temporary nature of bound-

ary encounters and the fluidity of CoPs: “They negotiate their own enterprise.... They arise, evolve, and dissolve according to their own learning, though they may do so in response to institutional events.... They shape their own boundaries” (p. 241). The learning that occurred through the town hall strengthened its constituent communities of practice. Community-building knowledge, as well as knowledge of rhetorical practice, developed through the event were not lost: they still resided in the shared history of the participants. Members of “latent” and “potential” communities of practice, as described by Wenger (1998), could once again design appropriate “boundary encounters” to bridge divisions between communities.

## CONCLUSION

As the case of the college town hall forum analyzed in this chapter illustrates, the fragmentation of academic communities in universities is a situation that calls for creative rhetorical action. Simply improving the effectiveness of existing communication modes in courses and meetings is unlikely to enable an academic community to function as a whole. Mutual encouragement and instruction between faculty and students—in the increasingly narrow institutional space beyond formally structured engagement in credit courses and business meetings—is sorely needed if faculty aim to teach ethical or democratic communication practices, to collectively demonstrate the value of the liberal arts to the public, to resolve internal institutional divisions, and to meet the external pressures and opportunities facing higher education and society.

In this context of fragmentation, rhetoric and writing studies provide theories and models for the bridging of often divided communities, the facilitation of collaborative knowledge making, the creation of a constructive shared understanding of challenges faced by academic communities, as well as the generation of solutions. Traditionally concerned with facilitating the participation of citizens in democratic deliberation and decision making, rhetorical theories can be put to action in the spirit of the Boyer Commission and the Wingspread Statement on Student Civic Engagement and engage students as co-producers of institutional knowledge for democratic decision making. After all, a complete education not only forms the mind through theory, but also offers opportunities to learn experientially within one’s own institutional community. An academic community, despite all its imperfections, can become a working example of how it hopes citizens and their leaders will practice communication in organizational and public contexts.

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Hall defines intercultural communication as a form of communication that shares information across different cultures and social groups. One framework for approaching intercultural communication is with high-context and low-context cultures, which refer to the value cultures place on indirect and direct communication. High-Context Cultures. A high-context culture relies on implicit communication and nonverbal cues. In high-context communication, a message cannot be understood without a great deal of background information. Asian, African, Arab, central European and Latin American cultures are See more of Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC) on Facebook. Log In. or. Building Bridges Across the River is the 501-c-3 nonprofit organization that built and now runs THEARC. The mission of Building Bridges Across the River is to ...improve the quality of life for children and adults who reside east of the Anacostia River by providing leadership, management and financial oversight of the Town Hall Education Arts Recreation Campus (THEARC). Through a collaboration of partner organizations, THEARC provides access to high quality educational, health, cultural, recreation, and social service programs. By providing these programs, BBAR and its partners aim to contribu

@inproceedings{Smith2011COMMUNITYTA, title={COMMUNITY THROUGH A TOWN HALL FORUM : RHETORICAL THEORIES IN ACTION}, author={Tania Smith}, year={2011} }. Tania Smith. Many faculty members have attempted to forge communities of knowledge and organizational practice in their classrooms that enable students to develop habits of thinking critically and acting like citizens in the wider community and workplace (Guarasci & Cornwell, 1997). Likewise, administrators are more frequently being asked to enhance students'™ experience of the university as a community of learners (Boyer Commission, 1998, ... November/December).

Knowing-in-action: The new scholarship requires a new.