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Major Assignment 1: Discourse Communities Narrative

Learning the Language of Live Production

There is a lot more that goes into a live production than most people would think. During a live musical performance, there are teams of people in charge of handling various aspects, including audio, media, cameras, atmospheric effects, stage props, microphones, performers, and more. This was all new to me when I signed up to be a volunteer for Potential Church in 2019. When I first walked into the production room, it looked like the inside of a spaceship. There were buttons, knobs, and switches everywhere, accompanied by a multitude of confusing labels that were supposed to show what they all did.

I started with the easiest job, camera operator for Camera 1. Camera 1 was the easiest because all you had to do was point the camera at the person on the stage and, now and then, adjust your zoom and focus. It was on Camera 1 where I learned some of the first lexis in this discourse community. The head producer in the camera control room said, “Camera 1 zoom and focus.” I was confused because I wasn’t sure if I was supposed to zoom in or out and how I needed to adjust my focus. I found out after the service that “zoom and focus” means to zoom in all the way and adjust the focus to the person on the stage, and then zoom back out, which allows for more precise focusing. This was one of the first lexis I would learn from being a part of this discourse community.

Soon after that, I moved on to more advanced cameras, like the mobile cameras. With the creative freedom to move around the auditorium, these cameras gave the operator a lot more control. Unlike the stationary cameras, which would be partly controlled from the control room, on the mobile cameras, the operator would be responsible for the ISO (brightness), color balance,

shutter speed, aperture, and many other things that change how the shot looks. Most importantly, the operator would have to find good places and angles to shoot. This came with a whole new set of lexis specifically for different zones in the auditorium. For example, if the producer wanted you on the stage in the back left, he would say, "Camera 7, stage left zone B." It was very important that operators of the mobile cameras understand the lexis for the discourse community to function properly. If an operator doesn't know where "stage left zone B" is, they won't go where they need to go, and there would be no camera available to capture the angle the producer wanted to get.

Another example of a time I learned new lexis was when I was using a mobile camera and the producer said, "Camera 6 you're hot." If you don't know the lexis, you could easily confuse that for a compliment, but it actually means quite the opposite. When the ISO is too high, the shot appears too bright or *hot*, so the producer is actually trying to tell the camera operator to turn the ISO down. As Dan Melzer points out, discourse communities develop their own "specialized terms—this musician's lexis—to make sure [members] were all playing together effectively" (Melzer 105). In the same way, our production team used a shared vocabulary to make sure everyone could do their job seamlessly.

Understanding this specialized language was only one part of working with the cameras. The mobile cameras themselves were complex pieces of equipment, with numerous components that we had to identify, understand the function of, and be able to assemble from scratch. This was important because if something malfunctioned on the camera during service, the camera operator would know what the problem is and how to fix it. Operators had to be familiar with various devices, including the Teradek, which transmitted the video signal to the control room;

the mount plate, which secured the camera in place; and the SDI/HDMI converter, which transformed the raw camera feed into a format that the Teradek could read.

The lexis helped us quickly communicate camera positions, technical adjustments, and stage directions during the services, but without the comms system and other mechanisms of intercommunication, this specialized language would be pointless. One of the most important mechanisms of intercommunication in our production team was the comms system, which allowed producers to direct camera operators in real-time, along with the confidence monitors (screens facing the stage) that guided performers and pastors during the service. Every camera operator, producer, backstage coordinator, lighting operator, and audio technician would be equipped with a comms headset, which created a constant stream of conversation behind the scenes.

During services, producers used the comms to tell camera operators which camera was currently displayed on the screens and to give instructions such as, “Audio, turn channel 46 up,” or “Backstage, bring out props.” Other team members also communicated through the system. For example, the audio technicians might say, “Backstage, Mic 4 is low battery, bring out Mic 5,” while the video operators would announce, “Playing welcome video” or “10 seconds left on video.” Kelly Xu explains how being new to a discourse community often means grappling with an unfamiliar lexis and hierarchy: “Simply not understanding the tacit rules, structure, and lexis of a community can make one feel ostracized as an outsider” (Seeley, Xu, and Chen 286). I experienced that same challenge early on, but the comms allowed me to learn how real-time communication worked and how to apply the new language of production.

While the comms system allowed for easy communication between the production team behind the scenes, the confidence monitors allowed for communication with the people on stage.

The confidence monitors would have timers, lyrics, and messages sent by the control room, allowing the performers and pastors to stay on track without needing to wear a clunky comms headset.

Another key part of our discourse community was the genres we used to organize and communicate. We used service run sheets that outlined every part of service from the worship to every video we played, so everyone would be on track and not have to ask what was coming next. The singers would have rehearsals on Thursdays, so everyone was familiar with the songs they needed to sing. They would remember the lyrics beforehand, so they didn't have to rely on the confidence monitors. We also used Planning Center, an online scheduling platform, to assign roles like camera operators, audio techs, lighting crew, and producers for each week. Finally, we had a WhatsApp group, which we used to plan activities outside the church, such as bowling and roller skating nights. As Melzer notes, genres are not just formats but “forms of social action within discourse communities” (Melzer 104). Our run sheets, rehearsal schedules, and online platforms were all genres that kept us aligned with our shared goals.

Swales also describes how discourse communities have a threshold level of expert members, and that was demonstrated in the way producers and senior volunteers trained newcomers. When I first started, I had no prior production experience, and I was assigned to Camera 1, where I learned basic commands and relied on producers to guide me. Over time, after being trained by others and learning through experience, I had completed over 700 service hours on cameras. I gained experience running almost every position, including lighting, cameras, audio, and even producer. At that point, I often trained new volunteers, fixed equipment problems, and answered questions from people just starting out. This progression from beginner

to expert shows how knowledge is passed down within the discourse community, ensuring that new members are supported while also keeping the production running smoothly.

Being a part of this discourse community has made me more confident to learn new things. When I started as a camera operator, I didn't know any of the lexis and I had to develop the skills to operate the cameras from scratch. After enough practice operating the cameras, I was titled the best Camera 3 operator, and I also became skilled in other roles such as producer and audio technician. Through these experiences, I gained the confidence that with enough practice, I can excel at anything I set my mind to. The terminology I learned in my time at Potential Church is also transferable to other production environments, since many of them rely on the same lexis, which makes me feel prepared to step into new settings without starting from scratch. As Xu reflects on her lab experience, true growth comes when you gain "confidence enough in your skills to complete tasks" and become recognized by others as a valuable contributor (Seeley, Xu, and Chen 287).

All of the lexis, equipment, communication systems, and genres in our production team were centered on one common goal: making sure the service ran as smoothly as possible and creating an immersive worship experience. The purpose of our work was to create an environment where the audience could focus completely on worship without being distracted by technical errors. Camera operators captured the best angles, audio technicians ensured that microphones and instruments were balanced, lighting operators created atmosphere, and producers directed the service and directed different teams. Looking back, being part of this discourse community didn't just teach me how to operate cameras or run equipment—it taught me how to communicate clearly in a production environment, work as part of a team, and join new communities with confidence.

Works Cited

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