



Division of Liberal Arts
English Department Section Outline
English 1301
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Thinking About Communities and Ideologies

From *Critical Situations*, by Sharon Crowley and Michael Stancliff, chapter 5

Community	Any group of people who are interested in a discussion because they have a stake in its outcome. Amongst a community, the people who make up a community will share a common ideology.
Commonplace	A statement that is in wide circulation and believed by many people. Even though they are widely believed, commonplaces are not always (or even often) true. Commonplaces may be controversial outside of the communities that subscribe to them. They often exist to hold the community together and may be offensive to groups who do not live within the community that holds them.
Ideology	A set of commonly held beliefs (or commonplaces) that are so closely connected to one another that they always appear together. These can include ideas, doctrines, and familiar ways of thinking that are characteristic of a certain group or culture. They can be economic, ethical, political, philosophical, social, or religious. Ideologies are complex and various, and they can often contradict one another; it is often these contradictions that stem vigorous debate. Webster states: a) a systematic body of concepts especially about human life or culture, b) a manner or the content of thinking characteristic of an individual, group, or culture, and c) the integrated assertions, theories and aims that constitute a sociopolitical program.

The Relationship Between Communities and Ideologies:

- *Communities often form around ideologies.* Greenpeace came into existence because a group of people believed in environmentalism and wanted to get together and do something about it. The Ku Klux Klan arose from a group fear of different races and religions, and its members united around this common mindset that American white identity must be preserved. (People's adherence to an ideology, clearly, does not mean that the ideology is automatically "right.")
- *Commonplaces can be used to strengthen the base of a community.* For example, the appeal of family values is a popular commonplace many people of the conservative political ideology celebrate. They understand family values as the idea that people are most morally good when they grow up in a nuclear family headed by two parents, a mother and a father. Hence, a conservative writer or speaker is more likely to argue that Americans could solve a range of problems, from teen pregnancy to drug abuse, if we would return to traditional family values. The commonplace of "family values" thus

becomes a way for conservatives to express their dismay that most Americans no longer live in nuclear families, and its use strengthens their sense of community in a variety of forums.

- *Often times, an ideological difference polarizes opinion between different communities.* The belief that personal economic success is the most important value is part of a capitalist, free-market, conservative ideology. This belief is not shared by liberal reformers working for social equality, who believe that the government should spend money (that comes from each person's economic success) on social programs to help people living in poverty obtain food, medical care, and housing. In debates about the national budget, this ideological difference (I want to keep my money! Vs. we need to share our money to help others!) sharply divides conservatives and the liberals.
- *The ideological orientation of the audience has everything to do with whether a commonplace phrase or statement will persuade them.* The persuasive power of rhetorical commonplaces depends upon the fact that they express assumptions held in common by people who subscribe to a given ideology. For example, a first principle of environmental philosophy is preservation of the earth's ecosystem. Slogans such as "Earth first" and "Good planets are hard to find" represent these ideas and remind members of their shared belief. They can be deployed as a rallying point whenever the group needs to be energized or reminded of their ideological commitments, or when they wish to persuade others to adopt their ideology. On the other hand, commonplaces presented to the wrong audience (one that holds a different set of beliefs) will not be effective. When environmentalists argue for limits on industry, for example, people who believe in laissez faire capitalism are often unwilling to entertain further discussion.

Community	Ideology	Commonplaces
Greenpeace	Environmental protection!	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Protect the ecosystem at all costs • Reduce consumption (of energy, of water, of Nintendo Wii, etc.) • Take a personal stand against corporations harming the environment