“I have no idea; let’s figure it out”:
rhetoric, collaboration,
and a new view of expertise

“Working with Writers: Recognizing Diverse Discourses”
University of New Mexico
March 23-24, 2011

The SLCC Community Writing Center

By the numbers...
- Over 4000 different community members have participated in CWC programs
- Over 130 community organizations (non-profit and governmental) have partnered with the CWC
- Average 40 writing workshops per year
- About 120 people participate in DiverseCity Writing Series writing groups
- Published about 20 anthologies of community writing

CWC Programs
- Writing Coaching
- Writing Workshops
- Writing Partners
- DiverseCity Writing Series

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CWC Writing Assistants

- Writing Coaching
- Workshop Curriculum and Facilitation
- Program Development and Coordination
  - DiverseCity Writing Series and Publishing
  - Volunteer Recruitment/Training/Support
- Partnership Development and Coordination
- Marketing and Public Relations
- Graphic Design and Website Management
- Events Planning and Facilitating
- Fundraising

What is expertise?
- The ability to apply specialized knowledge to complex problems in particular areas of study or work
  - Teachers
  - Mathematicians
  - Plumbers
- A means of marking the identity or status of an individual, typically in comparatively higher or superior relationships to others
  - Degrees (Bachelor’s, Master’s, PhD, JD, MD)
  - Positions (faculty, professor, specialist)

The quality of expertise

Concepts of Expertise

Higher Education/Academia
- Expertise is granted through credentialing process
- Expertise is an individual trait or accomplishment
- Hierarchy between faculty and students based on expertise
- People allowed to do work within their credentialed expertise
- Knowledge located in texts and teachers

Community Writing Center
- Hybridized culture (non-profit and education)
- Collaborative principles and practice
- Flattened hierarchy
- No one is an expert, but…
- Writing Assistants do work that they are not academically qualified to do.
Splitting of Knowledge

Knowledge without Rhetoric

Innate Rhetorical Expertise

Using Rhetoric
Alternate View of Expertise

Expertise can emerge through a collaborative process of rhetorical problem-solving. To navigate literacy situations existing outside of self-perceived expertise we need:

• Meta-knowledge of the existence of rhetorical problem spaces and conscious awareness of our own innate rhetorical abilities

• Access to a partial understanding of the discourse (domain content/rhetoric) surrounding the unfamiliar literacy situation via artifacts or dialogue*

• Trust in each other’s and our own, innate rhetorical abilities.

*Adapted from James Gee’s “mush fake” metaphor

Further Questions

• Do we talk about rhetoric in ways that reify the splitting of knowledge into domain content and rhetorical problem spaces?

• How do we build avenues for students to trust their rhetorical capabilities in the contexts of three-credit courses? How do we do it if we have 100 or more students at any one time?

• How might trusting in rhetorical capabilities influence how we interact with people in communities outside of our disciplines?

• How might it shift perceptions of our own expertise if we really trust that people have innate rhetorical abilities?

• Do we really want students and other people to take risks with complex literacy tasks?

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