What Expert Writers Do When They Don’t Solve Problems? Literate Expertise Revisited

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Literate Expertise Revisited is the title of a project that will heed a 30-year-old call for the literacy-research community to contribute to a general theory of expertise across skill domains. This means that the project will challenge the widespread assumption that reading and writing are fundamentally different from other skills in that experts spend more time and effort than novices on representative tasks.

The project is founded in several years of critical inquiry into the concept of skill with an ambition to contextualize the strong and somewhat unbalanced emphasis on strategic behaviour and problem solving in theory of reading and writing as well as in the instructional practice. What literate experts do when they don’t solve problems is less focused. We will explore the explanatory powers of everyday life expertise as a frame for understanding skills in general, and literate expertise in particular. In this perspective the tradition of expertise research is a highly relevant point of reference.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1991) claim to show that expertise in writing, unlike expertise in other skill domains, is characterized by greater effort than ‘novicehood’. They maintain that experts devote more time and energy to solving the tasks given to them than non-experts, while the case is the opposite in other domains. Their proposed explanation is that the increased use of time is linked to an increased cognitive load as a result of the complexity of the skill domain. On this basis, the authors assume that problem-solving strategies are crucial to expertise in reading and writing — which is quite different from the characteristics of expertise in other domains. The 2006 Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert performance does not describe reading, but it does deal with writing. In his review of writing research Kellogg describes a wide range of characteristic features in professional writing expertise, spanning from problem solving to studies of flow states in writing. The
cognitive load of writing is treated as a particular feature to be dealt with by the writer, but is also an important part of the tacit background of the review: Writing differs from other skills because of the cognitive load involved (Kellogg, 2006).

The only substantial criticism levelled at Scardamalia and Bereiter’s conception of expertise derives from a brief article by Mark Torrance published in 1996. In his article, Torrance addresses the tendency for circular reasoning between premises and conclusions which follows from the design of tasks. Torrance’s main point is that this type of study design has a critical blind spot as regards the importance of familiarity with genre. The design typically invites young participants to exercise what he sees as their genre-specific expertise, while the adults are forced into a genre that is not (no longer) familiar to them. This means that, for the adult assumed to be an expert, the task is unfamiliar despite its assumed simplicity; it does not afford the expert performing his expertise.

Key logging studies has shown a long initial pause for adult writers, followed by a fluent writing behaviour while writing text to a picture series. Young writers pause less initially but have a significantly larger amount of long pauses during writing. This is most often interpreted as a difference of high- and low-level processing. However, the impact of text type on the process of writing — and further theorizing — has not been investigated. Interestingly, our own research group has found no long initial pause (average 6 seconds) when adults write a text about how they celebrate Christmas, a text type which is more familiar and straightforward for the adult than for instance the picture series.

In order to deal with the similarity between the novice performing adequately within the limited frame of, for example a school genre and the expert performance in a far more complex and open domain, we need a theory of development that explains both the similarities and the differences between the two performers. The phenomenological skill model (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 2004) is but one possible frame of understanding. This model generally describes a developmental dynamics with effortless performance as a goal. Rules, maxims and problem-solving strategies are means for moving from the more limited overview of the domain onto being familiar with most of the situational complexes that might occur. The expert facing problems in this view will have to resort to strategies and planning in order to adjust the holistic response to the situation. But that does not make problem solving the normal condition for the expert; expertise is defined according to a human strive for balance between the intentionality of the individual and the affordance of his environment.

This understanding of expertise is general in that it is based on a philosophical understanding of the relation between individual and environment. Everyday expertise — that is the highly complex ways we relate to our surroundings on a biological, physical, cultural and discursive level — provides the optics for understanding also what we consider outstanding performance. More specifically it allows us to study reading and writing as skills alongside other skill domains.

The project will encompass writing tasks from three different domains: writing a story about everyday experience typical for school practice; writing in a familiar genre contextualized as everyday experience; and finally teachers’ professional reading of and written response to students’ texts. The first task has its design from