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## Metaconversations: Ongoing Discussion about Teaching Research Writing

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**Abstract**

This article is a follow up to an earlier publication that developed the rationale for using conversation as a metaphor to teach research writing. We presented this proposed teaching approach at several conferences, including WILU in May 2005 at Guelph, Canada. The discussions with participants in these presentations validated the tenets of the conversational metaphor for research writing. Here we provide a description of the research activities in the presentations, the subsequent responses by participants, and our thoughts on these responses. This dialogue between participants and the authors/presenters constitutes the metaconversation about teaching research writing.

**Metaconversations: Ongoing discussions about teaching research writing**Introduction

This article has, at its core, a conversational model of research writing that we articulated in an earlier work (McMillen and Hill, in press). Here we will focus on the metaconversations generated through audience participation at several professional conferences over the last 2 years, most recently at the WILU conference in Guelph, Canada. (We use the term ‘metaconversation’ to refer to those discussions about using the conversational metaphor for research writing instruction.) We refer the reader to our previous articles for a description of the initial library / composition program collaboration and assessment, as well as a selective review of literature on teaching research based writing (McMillen et al, 2002; McMillen & Hill, in press). As we noted in our previous article, the most rewarding part of our collaborative inquiry has been the learning we gained from conversations about the teaching process. Initially, we talked mainly with each other and our immediate colleagues, quickly recognizing the challenge and benefits of talking across disciplines. We soon expanded our conversations to include those who have written about teaching research writing. The conversations generated at conference presentations have provided a wonderful opportunity to further expand our thinking and get direct feedback on the conversational metaphor for research writing that emerged from our assessment of student papers. At these conferences, in small and large group activities, we asked participants to engage in a mock research activity, as a way of illustrating problem solving strategies for encouraging students to examine how they approach their own research. Our aim in this article is to recount and respond to some of the feedback we received from those conference workshops.

We wanted the structure of this article to generally reflect many of the characteristics of the research process that we discuss and that we seek to teach more effectively. We begin with a brief review of the audiences to which we have presented

at various conferences; a description of the research activities and format of our presentation follows. We will then summarize some of the comments we received from conference participants, responding to them in a messy dialogic manner, one which we feel reveals how our respective disciplines informed our participation in the metaconversation. Finally, focusing on the postulates we formulated concerning research as conversation, we will summarize how our sharing of information with peers in these metaconversations brought new light to our initial inquiry.

Whom we talked to:

Our initial presentation to a professional audience was at the statewide rhetoric and composition conference held in Portland, Oregon, in May of 2004. This was followed closely by our session at LOEX of the West in June, 2004 with a library instruction audience. At our presentation to the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities in January, 2005, our audience came from other disciplines – not a librarian or rhetorician among them. In May 2005, we presented at the Western Oregon University Center for Teaching and Learning. Finally, that same year we presented to a much more geographically diverse audience of instruction librarians at the WILU conference in Canada.

What we did:

When we first designed our presentation, we were committed to making it a hands-on experience that would help instructors in any discipline appreciate research writing from the students' perspective. We believed, based on our own and others' reports of teaching experiences, that students often respond to a research writing assignment as if we were talking to them in an unknown foreign language; we wanted to recreate that sense of being confronted with something unfamiliar so as to challenge the conference participants in such a way as to challenge them. Also, because so much information today comes to us in varied media formats, we wanted this media variety

represented as well. Consequently, we created research packets of materials that included photographs and drawings, symbols and paintings, verse, playbills, news and prose. Some items were in languages other than English. We created two packets, A and B, each with a different set of material; each conference participant was given either A or B. We then asked them to make sense of selected items with a series of guided activities. Utilizing some standard pedagogical practices for active learning, we invited attendees to a variation of “think, pair, share” with two items from each packet, one which they felt they could comfortably talk about with someone and one with which they were not familiar. We asked them to try and reach a better understanding of their unfamiliar item through a conversation, first with a single partner and then, by joining their pair to another, resulting in a group of three. We loaded – or as one participant put it, manipulated -- the contents of the two different packet sets so that different information about each item in a packet was found in the alternate packet. To take a specific example, we included in one packet set the drawing that was sent into space on the Pioneer 10 spacecraft, which included a line drawing of a naked man and woman, some little circles and lines representing the solar system, etc. In the other packet set was a clipping from a newspaper published at the time of the launch explaining the significance of the drawing. To put it another way, each packet set provided additional context or another perspective on the items in the other set. Not surprisingly, most people found in their pair or small group conversation that they could learn more about the unfamiliar item they had selected.

This set of activities evolved over successive presentations based on our experiences of actually implementing the activities as well as our participants’ responses. We initially asked people to share their processes for selecting items in one pair and then to discuss the items themselves in a 2<sup>nd</sup> pair. After a couple of sessions, we altered this approach. We reasoned that since part of our conversational model for

research was based on the interactive nature of meaning making in research writing, we could expand the opportunities to include more people (while still keeping the activity manageable). We therefore changed the format slightly to ensure that the 1<sup>st</sup> pair conversation included a partner who had a different research packet, and then we asked that pair to join with another pair to have a small group conversation. In both interactions, we asked participants to talk about both the selection process and their unfamiliar items. We also expanded activity instructions to pick people's brains more methodically and asked individuals to write down and then talk about the following: what they learned from the research activity; how they might adapt the activity to their own classrooms; and what they would like their students to learn from their own implementations. Because the comments in the large group discussions were so rich, we eventually decided to be more systematic about capturing the wealth of ideas and asked people to let us keep the index cards on which they had jotted notes for the different steps. As a result, much of the following metaconversation is based on the comments offered by participants in our most recent presentations.

We followed this active learning portion of the presentations with a more didactic approach that briefly described the findings of our qualitative assessment of students' research papers. We then outlined the aspects of and justifications for our choosing conversation as an appropriate teaching metaphor for the research writing process. We ended by inviting participants to begin their own metaconversations, i.e., because we gained so much from the various metaconversations we'd been involved in, we encouraged them to begin conversations about teaching research writing across disciplines at their own institutions, and also encouraged them to share what they learned as a result with us.

What we heard:

In the process of reviewing the comments from these various conference workshops, we began to realize how our different academic disciplines seemed to be informing our selection of and reactions to participant responses. Since we felt that our individual reactions added yet another layer to the metaconversation, we decided to juxtapose them separately below. (Direct or closely paraphrased comments of actual participants are put in double quotes.)

Paula's take on our discussions with conference participants reflected, not surprisingly, those aspects that she felt highlighted aspects of our conversational model. As a librarian, she does not have the same ongoing contact with students that Eric does, and so she focused more on comments about effectively communicating key aspects of information literacy and engaging students in the research process in a short time frame.

Since Eric's training is in rhetoric and composition – and since he teaches rhetorical analysis and argument as a means of critical thinking, composition, and source evaluation – he tended to gravitate toward those comments from the metaconversation that most specifically challenged, mirrored, or related in any way to the conversation in the classroom.

*Paula:*

Participant comments often seemed relevant to more than one tenet of our conversational model for research writing or to more than one aspect of information literacy. Much of what I noticed about participant feedback could generally fall under the heading of the value provided by multiple perspectives and the interactive nature of conversations. Participants found both the expressive and receptive roles in their conversations to be useful. As a background note, it is pertinent to know that we included on the cover of all the research packets (both A and B versions) a collage-like image of an elephant and the allegory of blind men trying to identify its different parts (e.g., trunk, ear, legs, etc.). In the allegory, the blind men assume that what they are

experiencing is representative of the whole and rely exclusively on prior knowledge to make sense of it. By including the image and the allegory, we hoped to highlight the importance of looking at something from multiple perspectives.

With regard to the process for the selection of items, people articulated several different approaches to choosing a talkable and an unfamiliar item from the research packets. One of the most common strategies was to select the item they knew most about for the former and the one they knew least about for the latter. They mentioned recognition or partial recognition as a key factor, as well as consideration of their prior level of knowledge about the item/subject. This may seem intuitively obvious, but in fact there were other strategies, such as choosing something to talk about because it was unfamiliar and therefore aroused interest and curiosity. Notably, several people commented that even though they knew something about their talkable item, they often gained new information or their knowledge of the item was enhanced through their conversations with others. Here are some participant comments that we found fairly representative were: “the connections you make when you refer to a larger number of sources are better than just taking the first couple of things that come along”; “realize the incomplete nature of what we think we know,” “multiple sources and perspectives add richness,” and “many parts make up a better whole.”

Conversely, as observed by several participants, when one starts hearing or seeing the information repeated, that is an indicator that one is beginning to understand the subject in depth. Some noted that this would perhaps be a good way to address the commonly encountered consequences of students choosing a writing topic for writing about which they already feel knowledgeable or about which they hold strong opinions. Similar activities could serve to experientially remind them that there are other perspectives to be considered on any piece of knowledge. In one group someone noted that she was very surprised to find another group member chose as his talkable item the



one she was least attracted to. Along these same lines a participant suggested that this was good way to help people recognize the assumptions they come to a task with.

Regarding the value of the expressive role in conversation, we heard several comments about the enhancement of learning by sharing with others. Talking about a subject with someone else can help one understand what one is doing and also offer new paths to explore. "Ideas move forward faster when you talk about them," one participant offered. Writing as well as speaking was helpful, "by writing down something -- even if you thought you didn't know much about it to start with -- you aid your thinking" offered one participant. Another person suggested that this might help students identify key concepts in their topic idea. Participants thought the potential learning outcomes might include the realization for students that there are some benefits to collaboration on research projects, and that there may be conflicting but informative points of view on that which many of them take for granted. To paraphrase, "the knowledge that each of us has is limited and that's ok." Everybody can still contribute something and this might help "overachieving students" recognize the value of others' ideas.

*Eric:*

In using the metaphor of conversation for the research process, we certainly meant to call attention to the fact that research goes well beyond text. The purpose of having the participants work individually and then in groups extended beyond the obvious (i.e., that those with packet A would help those with packet B, etc.), but we were excited about hearing just how dramatically the exercise illustrated the interactive nature of the research process. Several participants were interested in using this same exercise as a way of illustrating to their students that sharing research is a good way of expanding that research, of gaining perspectives that may not have been apparent at first. As an instructor who works exclusively for an honors college, I was particularly

taken with the comment that this exercise might be valuable in demonstrating to “overachieving students” the worth of other perspectives.

A valuable insight on fostering student conversations, contributed by our meta-conversation participants, is the shift in power relationships that occur when students utilize one another in the processes of gathering information, making meaning and communicating ideas. There is an unavoidable power differential, based on the teacher-student relationship, that operates in the classroom; the teacher, by nature of his or her position, maintains some element of control over students in the form of grades, activity facilitation, and knowledge dispersal. However, it was noted by several participants that the shift from individual to small group did much to reduce the intimidating effects of that “I know more about this than you do” dynamic as each was able to contribute what they did know about an item to create a larger/collective body of knowledge.

I was particularly drawn to those responses that expressed resistance on the part of a few conference participants to follow or even accept what for us seemed simple and reasonable directions for exercises (moreover that most of the resistance came from those in my field). This questioning of the rules from peers in a conference setting contrasted starkly with what I was used to in a classroom setting: students receiving and following direction without too much in the way of questions. On the rare occasion when students do question content or direction, I see it as an opportunity to explore a real-life example of rhetorical analysis. That our peers in a conference setting would feel more comfortable about challenging our direction emphasized for us the need to pay attention to (and perhaps counteract?) the power differential that exists in the classroom.

Although this power differential is still mirrored in the conference setting, one important distinction comes from the fact that we are participating in a meta-conversation with our peers rather than teaching students. As one workshop participant commented, there is a power differential implicit in our giving them an individual task. This same

participant went on to say, however, that this power differential shifts as soon as we get them into groups. Indeed, another dynamic that we experienced (and that is experienced by any teacher who gets students into groups) was a loss of control -- a diminution of power -- with the shift to small group activities. While they had a specific task to accomplish (i.e., to discuss the *process* of how they chose their items from the packets), we often found ourselves wanting to remind groups not to “get off task,” particularly if we heard them discussing the items rather than the process or even attempting to contextualize the items outside of the exercise (e.g., “I remember seeing this movie when I was a kid,” etc.) Yet we argue in our initial paper that research is ‘messy’, nonlinear, and recursive, and that is what we were seeing in the exercise. These instances of confusion or resistance led us to alter our approach at subsequent conferences, but also provided us with some fascinating insights into issues of communication and method that fell outside the parameters of the exercise.

As stated earlier, while the two packets we provided for workshop participants (A and B) had different images and texts within, both did share the same cover page: a drawing of an elephant and the allegory in verse. At a rhetoric conference in Portland, Oregon, we handed out the packets and explained that they could choose any item (text or image) except for the elephant on the cover. One participant immediately responded to this with, “But I already chose the elephant.” In some instances resistance was born not out of a possessiveness or unwillingness to relinquish power, but through miscommunication. At a humanities conference in Hawaii a year later, we were careful to clarify *before* handing out the packets that we would like them to choose any item from *except* for the elephant, feeling that applying a restriction prior to handing out the packets would nip this “problem” in the bud. One participant, however, chose the allegory. When we approached her on this and asked her to choose another item, she said, “You said we couldn’t choose the elephant on the cover. I didn’t. I chose the

poem.” Rather than illustrating a simple refusal to surrender the selected item, this pointed to an assumption regarding communication about research and instructions that I often address in the classroom. These assumptions about communication (that often give rise to counterarguments borne out of initial arguments) exist in the area of argumentation that the philosopher Stephen Toulmin refers to as warrants (2003). Each assertion or claim must be accompanied by evidence that supports that argument, but there are also a series of givens or warrants that guarantee common ground. Had we brushed off or countered the workshop participant’s comment with, “Well, that’s splitting hairs. You know what we meant,” we may have passed up an opportunity to explore how research, communication, and argument all exist in the realm of hairsplitting. When we tell our students to go out and write a research paper and they come back with a paper they first wrote and then added a series of sources plagiarized from Googled web sites, we have the choice to say, “You know what I mean” or we can choose to re-examine our own expectations and assumptions as educators regarding how information literacy is best communicated.

*Paula:*

People liked that the knowledge came in the form of something other than text and this seemed to provoke them to think about the items in perhaps novel ways. For example, one person noted that two items were both symbolic representations of larger concepts, but diverged in the particulars of the concepts. One also suggested that the variety of media increased the interest level of the ‘research’ assignment. Another suggested that these various media and their contributing perspectives might be likened to the different contributions offered by primary vs. secondary sources.

*Eric:*

Discomfort in a reader can also be the result of the type of media in which information is presented. One participant in the workshops made the following comment

concerning a newspaper item from one of the packets: "News makes me frantic." For some of an older generation, the Internet is not so much a medium of potential as it is intimidating; among younger students the same could be said for navigating the endless halls of hard copy text. For this conference participant, just the idea of news is unsettling -- the form (not content) in which the information is being conveyed already creates a sense of distress or at least discomfort.

Others commented on the contextualization (or, in some cases, the decontextualization) of items. For some the fact that many of the items were familiar (shapes, language, etc.) yet out of their context made the process all the more frustrating or at least challenging. Some found that the juxtaposition of familiar and unfamiliar (or as one participant put it, "ordinary and unusual") items invited new ways of thinking about familiar concepts. This was particularly true for those items whose symbolic meaning carried various messages, for example an image of a swastika; one participant said that it would be difficult to explain its meaning outside of its historically negative connotations.

*Paula:*

Over and over people spoke of the essential value of adding context to increase understanding. Some even noted that they chose as their talkable item the item which provided the most context. Others noted that they "created contexts" from their prior knowledge to increase understanding. The fact that both conversation and research are contextual in nature is one of the main components of our justification for the metaphor.

This was not purely an intellectual set of exercises and neither is research in the best of all worlds. There is excitement and anxiety coming into play. Several of our braver respondents noted particular personal recollections (both positive and negative) that were stimulated by the items in the packet. Memories and "previous understanding" were evoked. Familiarity, interest, mastery and a sense of connection all were attractive

to participants and all carried a positive emotional tone. Conversely, people picked the unfamiliar item based on not wanting to look silly in front of others, perceiving themselves as having no experience or point of reference and thus having nothing to say, and judging them as too complicated or confusing or just too hard. Some spoke of choosing their talkable vs. unfamiliar item based on what felt “scary” vs. what felt “safe” or “comfortable”, further increasing their awareness of the emotional components for choosing. Kuhlthau (2004, p.7) notes that anxiety around encountering and needing to wrestle with the unknown is one of the most often overlooked aspects of the information seeking process. A related aspect of this theme is the perception of risk. Specifically they noted, “research isn’t risky, communication is.” A participant in a different group notes that risk is reduced by doing this information gathering and constructing exercise in a group. That person noted that when an assignment is given, there is an inherent power differential, a belief that the assigner has the knowledge about the subject and how to do the research process and the assignee is supposed to figure it out. By engaging in such “research communities” of peers students might be able to approach research with less trepidation and a greater sense of interest and engagement. The focus is taken off them as the sole source of information and they may be freer to expand what they will consider.

*Eric:*

In our paper on research as conversation we point out the risks of academic research for students, and how research challenges students’ comfort zones. At two separate conferences in two separate countries, however, we heard participants argue that the risk is not so much in the researching but in the communication of that research to others. The risk or discomfort stems from a number of reasons, not the least of which comes from, as one participant put it, not wanting to look silly in front of one’s peers. In this respect, perhaps we mirror our students when we attend conferences. We want to

share what we have researched and written about, but we also know that there is risk involved in the communication. Are we clearly and convincingly presenting the information in a way that will convince listeners of its value? Do our reasoning and conclusions stand up to scrutiny?

What we learned:

We will use the assertions about the similarities between conversation and research writing, postulated in our earlier article (McMillen & Hill, in press), as a framework for this discussion. We want to learn is whether or not our model makes sense and reflects the experience of instructors. (Quotes are taken from the earlier article by McMillen and Hill, although page numbers can't be provided at this point.)

*Conversation as familiar activity*

“Begin with the familiar as a means of introducing the unfamiliar. It is, we believe, initially easier for novice researchers to understand the metaphor of conversation than the formal structure of academic discourse embodied in research.” Although we explicitly structured our activity around one item that was talkable and one item that was unfamiliar, participants spontaneously noted how important familiarity and connection (emotional and intellectual) were in providing context for their understanding; this went well beyond anything we built into the activity. Familiarity was, in fact, the primary factor we heard them identify as determining their selection of items to talk about. Positive affect, such as “comfort” or “mastery,” often accompanied the cognitive activity of recognition. Conversation, as an activity familiar to the majority of our students, can thus serve to ease students past the emotional and intellectual hurdles we all encounter when confronted with something unfamiliar, whether it be a process or information.

*Research as a second language (RSL)*

In our initial article, we refer to students who come to college or university without a basic understanding of information literacy as Research as a Second Language (RSL)

students. “Research is like learning to converse in a second language.” Learning the language of research (the process, we argue, has a “grammar” or set of rules and even “dialects” in different disciplines) requires students not only to perform the action of research, but also to synthesize the learned information and be able to explain it to others. This, we suggest, is much like learning a foreign language. One can memorize verb conjugations and phrases, but to speak extemporaneously using these rules and functions can be tricky and even frightening.

Returning to participant comments that the research itself was not as risky as the communication was, it became relatively clear to us that while there was some discomfort for participants in choosing items from the packet, the real risk was in attempting to explain this item to others in the group. This finding supports parallels we see between the challenge in mastering a new language and in mastering the research process.

We also suggested in the earlier article that “It may help students if we draw parallels to and from developing conversational skill in a second language,” partially because of the familiarity with that process we would expect most college students to have and partially because we can draw on best practices for teaching a second language. This is not an assertion we specifically addressed in the activity and not one that we heard participants mention.

*Conversation and research are both interactive processes:*

“Research as a conversation implies participation and engagement with others who are also interested in the same issues.” This was really a key element of the model we hoped to instantiate through the ‘research’ activity in our presentations and our hopes were well rewarded. Regardless of the setting (after lunch in a hot classroom being perhaps the most challenging) or the audience, this interactive approach to doing research generated lively conversation.



The small group 'research' activity in our presentations, in an abbreviated way, mimics the creation of classroom-based research and learning community. Several authors have spoken of the benefits of classroom-based research communities for generating interest and increasing engagement in the work (notably Kleine, 1987). Bruffee believes such collaborative focus provides additional context and an opportunity to "practice' the kinds of conversation valued by the academic community." (Bruffee, 1984, cited in Moore & O'Neill, 2003, p.143). Additionally, Moore & O'Neill think that such conversations will increase students' appreciation for the diversity of perspectives on a given topic, text or idea. All of these suppositions seemed to be borne out by our conference participants' experience. A quote from Georgia Newman reiterates Klein's assertions about the value of discourse to research writing and epitomizes the present authors' process — how it parallels what we ask students to do, and also provides support for our conversational model as an approach.

Traditional research usually presumes thinking and writing, but rarely is speaking a component. Regardless of how well structured a research assignment may be, however, writing alone will seldom develop a student as a full-fledged scholar. Just as professionals test their theories through informal discussions with peers, through publication in peer-reviewed journals and the like, and through engagement with others in professional conference presentations, so students benefit from opportunities to test their own ideas before a public audience of their peers. Small, well-designed, carefully monitored, cooperative learning groups can afford students an ongoing opportunity to hone their critical thinking and to engage in the process of evaluation that characterizes scholars at their best. (Newman, 2003, p.108)

One person commented that the conversations made the ideas come faster, and others noted that ideas generated in conversations offered new directions to consider. It is impossible to cleanly separate this aspect of the conversational model from the aspects of meaning construction, context, and recursivity.

*Conversation and research are both contextual:*

“Conversation, like research, is situated in context. Conceptualizing conversation that spans time and distance can help students expand the chronological and geographic context of an issue.” Many bits and pieces of participants’ responses bolstered this assertion. Time and again, people referred to experiences early in their lives as influential in their understanding, thus expanding the participants’ chronological consideration of information gathering. In microcosm (North America), our participants represented diversity of space/geography in bringing their perspectives to increasing the understanding of the various pieces of information. Several participants referred to the amount of context an item itself provided as being influential in it is being selected for discussion or not. Group discussion made clear how relative this perception was. In other words, the very perception of context had to do with how the item fit into the individual’s existing frame of reference; an item that had lots of context for one participant seemed totally foreign and puzzling to another. Of course we planned the ‘research packet’ content to provide additional context for each item in the alternative packet, and participants were usually quick to discover how this additional information increased understanding of the formerly unfamiliar item. Even when information remained incomplete, additional context was often enough to allow educated guesses to be aired. To take a specific example, there’s an excerpt from Dante’s *Inferno* in one packet and a brief bio on Dante is in the other. A participant looking at the *Inferno* excerpt commented, “It’s Italian. What do I know!” More than he thought, since

recognizing it as Italian was significant. Once he saw the Dante bio in the other packet, he could postulate that it was an excerpt from Dante's famous work. As participants talked with one another about their selection processes, the centrality of context for making sense of information clearly emerged.

*Conversation and research are recursive processes*

"The metaphor of conversation fosters a process orientation instead of a task or product orientation to research writing, and conversation, like research writing, is usually not a straightforward process." Some participants noted that even though they felt they knew a good deal about a selected item in some cases, they often increased or enriched their understanding through conversation with partners. They then revisited their original conceptions. Referring back to one participant's comment that a fellow attendee's choice of a different item to talk about made her wonder both about her partner's thinking process but also about her own and why she had avoided it so strongly. Beyond the potential truism that collaboration helps understanding, in many cases the sharing of information initiated a recursive approach for the individual to better understand his or her selected items. This aspect of the conversational model is also inseparable from the similarity in meaning making between the two processes.

*Research, like conversation, builds meaning*

"We construct meaning from our conversations" just as we ideally do with the research writing process. We explicitly asked participants in the second part of the activity to try to make more sense of the item they selected as unfamiliar. Many of the sample conversations already cited support this constructivist conceptualization of conversation. Carol Kuhlthau's approach to the information seeking process was instrumental in our choice of the conversational metaphor because it included not just the cognitive aspects of meaning making but also the emotional ones (2004, cf. Ch. 1). The participants' conversations about selection processes and about trying to

understand their 'unfamiliar' items were liberally sprinkled with affective elements. Words such as "risk", "scary", "foolish", "silly", "dis/comfort", "excitement", "curiosity", etc.

indicated the importance of considering how students feel about the topic, the task and the process of research writing.

*Conversing – and researching – across disciplines*

"Conversational metaphor is easily shared across disciplines." The validation for this assertion comes more from our experience with participants *across* conferences than from participants within a given conference. With the exception of our presentation at the Hawaii International Conference on Arts and Humanities, where our participants represented disciplines as diverse as theatre and mycology, our conference audiences were typically homogenous in terms of discipline. We have primarily talked with instructors from rhetoric, composition and libraries and they have consistently been able to quickly adopt the language of this conversational metaphor to frame their teaching questions and ideas. We ourselves were drawn to this metaphor because it allowed us to identify common ground for pedagogical practice and learning outcomes without having to wade through our incomplete understandings of the other's disciplinary jargons.

After one particularly lively workshop at Boise State University, a library instructor commented (admitted) that she had eavesdropped on the conversation going on in the group next to hers. In doing so, she and her group were able to make sense of their difficult items. To some extent, this "eavesdropping" speaks to our very reason for using the parable of the blind people and the elephant: Each blind person could represent a discipline attempting to make sense of the quanta "out there." Eavesdropping, which is a term that could apply to reading and conversing, allows someone from a specific discipline to inform his or her research in such a way as to reveal what should already be evident: That we are using different tools to make sense of the same body of knowledge.

Beyond the axiomatic application of this parable, it points to a need for communication across disciplines. Is there a lingua franca that might help our students apply the processes of one type of research to another field? One of the frustrations for those who teach writing and library instruction, and for students who take these classes, is the question, “Why are we learning this style of citation?” If the student who is asking is a science major and the writing instructor is teaching MLA, which seems a reasonable assumption, will the student be able to transfer the process rather than the particulars of citation?

### Summary

Since our article describing the conversational model of research writing was only recently published, none of our conference participants were familiar with it prior to participating in the research activity. Obviously we structured the activity based on our model, and yet it still seems fair to say that the reactions of participants served to validate that we were on the right track. They appreciated being put in the student position and offered descriptions of their process that highlighted the value of the interactive and iterative approach, that clearly indicated how meaning was constructed through their conversations, and that emphasized the critical importance of context for understanding a piece of information. It was gratifying to find that across a range of audiences from different disciplinary backgrounds, this approach resonated and was amenable to translation into their own jargon and learning outcomes. One of the primary motivators for our original collaboration was a desire to more easily talk about and better teach those essential skills and concepts we want our students to master, whether we call these skills information literacy or applying an epistemological approach to their research.

Once again, we would like to end with an invitation. As you move forward in finding your own ways to incorporate a conversational approach to teaching research writing skills, please consider sharing your conversations with us.

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