Conversations for Reflection:
Augmenting Transitions and Transformations in Expertise

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Abstract: The challenge of augmenting transitions and transformations through technological design is addressed here by putting forward a model of Conversations for Reflection. This model helps deal with the practical problem of helping people develop their professional expertise. The model specifies procedural conditions that support the complex communicative activity of publicly testing private assumptions, surfacing dilemmas, and publicly discussing sensitive issues. This is illustrated by showing how the model informs two interventions that augment the development of expertise. The model follows from the theory of reflective practice, current understanding of accounting behavior in interaction, and the insights and recent developments in theory and research on the Language Action Perspective. The model, its rationale, and use illustrate an approach to understanding knowledge as a process.

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1 Introduction

A common workplace issue involves the development of an individual’s competence to perform their work—that is, how is it that doctors, mechanics, lawyers, engineers, system designers, pharmacists, sales representatives, marketers, legislators, teachers, librarians, journalists, plumbers and so on become good at what they do? This is a pressing issue in the early stages of a person’s career as she or he transitions from novice to expert practitioner. The issue does not go away as people are expected to become more effective at what they do. Furthermore, people are often challenged to transform the expertise they have developed in solving one class of problems so that it can be used to address another class of problems. While people routinely manage these
transitions and transformations in their expertise, it is no small matter for them, the organizations in which they work, or for those who use their services or products. The development of an individual’s competence at performing their work raises a practical question with interesting theoretical implications for understanding knowledge processes: How can the transformations and transitions in expertise be augmented and otherwise supported through technological design?

The question at hand draws out some important matters about the relationship among knowledge, technology, and social interaction. The question downplays knowledge as an informational product acquired and managed through information seeking behavior. The question instead exposes knowledge as a process embedded in the meaning engagement practices of people (e.g., Mokros & Aakhus, 2002). An implication is that transformations and transitions in expertise might best be characterized by the cultivation of judgment not simply the acquisition of information. Knowledge is thus bound up in the practices of interaction and argumentation (e.g., Goldman, 1996; Toulmin, 1972) where people work out the truths, commitments, perspectives, and identities central to their work. Moreover, the question at hand downplays information technology as a syntactic web of interconnected information resources or even as a semantic web of information resources aligned through ontologies and rules. The question instead suggests that information technology be understood as a pragmatic web for augmenting human meaning negotiation (de Moor, 2005; Schoop de Moor, & Dietz, 2006). Indeed, information technologies might be best understood as procedures for shaping and disciplining the interaction and argumentation constitutive of how individuals and communities develop expertise and competence. What information technology presupposes about interaction in its design is consequential for meaning engagement practice (see Aakhus & Jackson, 2005).

Any answer to the question at hand must engage with what the question opens up in terms of conventional beliefs about knowledge and technology. It is worth noting that this chapter will not use the conventional starting points for discussing knowledge and technology (e.g., tacit vs. explicit, information vs. knowledge, or information retrieval and storage). The point in doing this is to highlight conceptualization and discussion of knowledge processes. The answer to the question at hand in this chapter is answered by putting forward a model—the Conversation for Reflection—for designing (and assessing) means to augment transformations and transitions in expertise. It is an attempt to be a demonstration of conceptualizing knowledge processes rather than just talking about what knowledge processes might be.

The Conversation for Reflection (CfR) treats expertise and the knowledge that constitutes that expertise as the artful competence of handling complexity, instability, and value-conflict when people engage in handling problematic situations. The CfR brings together insights from Schön’s theory of reflective

1 This definition is borrowed from Schön (1983)